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Collaboration and Co-teaching in a High Needs Learning Environment

by

Heather West

A thesis submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of The College of Brockport, State University of the state of New York in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree of Master of Science in Education.

Abstract

Co-teaching is a dynamic relationship between two teachers sharing the responsibilities of a classroom. In a typical co-taught classroom there are two expertise, a general education teacher and a special education teacher. In this study, I have examined the relationship of my co-taught classroom that is focused in a high needs environment. We are both special education teachers with a variety of skills and experiences. I also included the collaborative relationship we have formed with another teacher in order to instruct a small group of girls with special needs in a health education class.

The problems that I have examined within this study revolve around co-teaching and collaboration. I have focused on the process of collaboration, the supportive factors and how our non-typical form of teaching has supported our collaboration. This was done by examining the data collected from reflections, observation notes and interviews of the participants.

Key words:

Co-teaching, collaboration, special education, balancing, communication, high-needs, autism, health education, environment and reflection

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Chapter one: Statement of the problem

During an after school discussion, I brought up my concern about a 20 year old student with disabilities in my class. Laura (all names are pseudonyms) has a strong lack of knowledge and confusion about issues related to sexual health. During a health lesson the day before, I noticed that Laura was having difficulty naming and describing body parts. This was a concern, as she was soon transitioning out of this placement and moving on to adult services. As one of her teachers, I see an importance in learning about sexual health in the “real-world”. This was also a concern, brought up by my co-teacher and my mentor teacher, for another of the girls in her class. She was knowledgeable about some things related to sexual health but confused about others. Therefore, to resolve this issue we created a group among our two classes that included three girls, two from ours and one from our mentor’s class, which addressed the needs of these students. We started this class with a simple K-W-L (I know, I want to learn, and I learned) chart. This allowed us to get a baseline of knowledge on the content material and gave us some areas that we can pursue in future lessons.

This model of collaboration between classes then provided us with ideas to start a science group, craft group, cooking group and a boy’s health group. This allowed us to group students within our own classroom as well as between classrooms based on the needs of the individual, as well as incorporate cooperative learning into an otherwise typically individualized classroom. One important component of having all these groups is the requirement of collaboration among teachers. We need to know: who is collecting the material(s) for the lesson, how we will assess learning, how we will instruct during the lessons, and where and when will they take place?

Many of the students placed at my school also reside on campus due to individual needs. The school and residences are all on one campus and many of the students transition daily from their residence to the school with staff. At 2:30 on Mondays, after all of the students have walked home to their residential placements, Erin my co-teacher, Julia our mentor teacher, and I collaboratively plan our group lessons that we teach. The groups include a different combination of students from both of our classes. We decided to do group lessons because many of the students benefit from working with a variety of students. This allows us to place students within certain groups based on where the student is at academically and developmentally. As a team, we decide which topic to go on to and what we need to re-teach or further emphasize. We also designate who is going to prepare which portion of the lesson during our planning sessions based on each of our individual skills as teachers, as well as what resources each of us already has.

As Erin and I are co-teachers, we do not both teach the lessons, but it is interchangeable who takes the lead teaching role. The overall process of our planning allows both of us to have an understanding of the topic. Our planning sessions typically include a lot of discussion. We are frequently reflecting and rethinking what works best for our students. It may seem that two teachers in one room would be able to plan and prepare in half the time, but as co-teachers, we do not split the work. Instead, we collaborate and pull in our separate backgrounds and resources to fit the individual needs of our students. Once a week we also meet with Julia, our mentor teacher. Between the three of us, we all create lessons in content areas that will meet the needs of our students according to their academic level, interests and areas of need. The age range, 17-20 years old, is similar between the two classes and this allows us to pool our resources between the classes.

Erin and I started our positions as special education teachers in the summer of 2013. We both started previously as teacher assistants in a private residential school in Western New York. I had been working at the school for approximately six months. I had recently started my graduate studies and this was my first experience working in a school. This was also a challenge because I had never worked with students with special needs, but I learned a lot those first six months and I felt confident in my abilities as a teacher. Therefore, along with Erin, we decided to apply for an open position of special education teacher together with the intention of becoming co-teachers. We were then hired on as co-teachers in a 6:2:2 (six students, two teachers, and 2 teacher's assistants) classroom.

In a letter of intent we wrote to the Director of Education at our school, we shared some of the strengths of what hiring the pair of us would offer the school. We understood that neither of us had experience as teachers, but we both have experience with many of these students and backgrounds in special education. Our reasoning for selling ourselves as a team was so that with the lack of experience we had on our resumes we could make up for with our certifications and degrees as well as an opportunity to use one another to problem solve, reflect and plan our classroom together.

As Erin and I started settling into our new positions, we realized there was a lot to coordinate and figure out, not only as new teachers, but also as teachers working as a team. We needed to figure out how we were going to organize, record progress, share responsibilities and plan. For co-teachers to be successful it is important they engage in daily active communication, shared planning and instructional delivery, as well as figure out how conflicts will be resolved (Brown, Howerter, & Morgan, 2013; Hepner & Newman, 2010). I wanted to investigate in this

study the multiple layers of collaborating in both general terms and specifically, collaboration within our 6:2:2 co-taught classroom residential school for students with special needs setting.

Significance of the Problem

In the typical co-taught classroom, co-teaching involves collaboratively planning, instructing, and assessing a group of students with and without disabilities (Murawski & Hughes, 2009). This model of teaching stems from the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, where students are taught in the least restrictive environment (LRE) that is appropriate for the student (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires all students to have access to the general curriculum and to be taught by highly qualified teachers (Friend, et al., 2010). The outcome of co-teaching allows students to be both taught by teachers who have the content background as well as the special education background as well as taught within the LRE for each student.

Co-teaching can often be seen as a complicated and a dynamic work relationship. As with any personal relationship, there needs to effective communication, a defining and sharing of responsibilities and a balance of power. Co-teaching is a working relationship between teachers. Both parties bring to the table skills that need to be respected and utilized within the classroom. One common problem identified in the research literature was the lack of professional development targeting co-teaching strategies which allow teachers to collaborate collectively and use one another's skills and specialties in the classroom (Friend, Hurley-Chamberlain, Shamberger & Cook, 2010; Charles & Dickens, 2012; Nichols & Sheffield, 2014; Pearl, Dieker & Kirkpatrick, 2012; Conderman, Johnston-Rodriguez, & Hartman, 2009).

There have been six different models of co-teaching identified: One teach, one assist, parallel teaching, station teaching, alternative teaching, one teach, one observe and team teaching (Friend, et al., 2010). All six are different ways to deliver co-teaching instruction, depending on the needs of the students, the learning activity, or the classroom set up. As depicted in this research there is a lack of knowledge for teachers on how to use these dynamic models effectively and appropriately in the classroom. Often teachers choose one model, such as the one teach, one assist, and stick to the model throughout their teaching (Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011). It is important for schools to support the professional development of co-teachers so that they make the best choices for their students.

The focus of the current research on co-teachers is on the general education teacher and a special education teacher in an inclusive education classroom. My study is looking at co-teaching and collaboration in a high needs environment with students with special needs. As co-teachers, we have similar certifications, but our experiences and different strengths make us a team that is able to use one another's expertise. Through this specific context, my research examined the multiple aspects of co-teaching and collaboration.

Purpose of the Study

By studying co-teaching and the factors that make it a productive relationship, I have learned about being an effective collaborator, which will take me throughout my entire career as a teacher. I may not necessarily be in the position of co-teacher my entire career, but the essence of co-teaching is collaboration. Collaboration is the key to ensuring success for my students. There will always be interactions with clinicians and other professionals and it is important to be able to build a relationship with those colleagues in order to use everyone's expertise to the fullest.

A big part of this study has been including my own self-reflection and looking at my own practices of co-teaching and collaboration. This study has also allowed me to build on my own understanding of my methodology of teaching, how I work with colleagues and the interactions that take place. It is important to constantly reflect and modify your teachings to fit the needs of your students. As I reflect on my learnings, I am able to take what I learned and apply it to my own co-teaching and collaborative relationship.

I have also been able to share my findings with my colleagues at school. Not every class is set up within a co-teaching environment, but as teachers, we are constantly interacting and collaborating. These findings may enable a positive environment for more cross-classroom groups among students with similar needs. Co-planning and teaching is not necessarily a skill for co-teachers in one class, but are skills necessary for all professionals working and caring for students.

The experience of researching essential questions relevant to my personal teaching practices has improved my ability to analyze qualitative data gathered from colleagues and self-reflections. This is an important skill necessary for success and longevity in the education field. It is important for teachers to stay current in their teaching strategies and reflect on whether or not these strategies are fitting the needs of the individual student. The central questions in my study are:

- What is the process when co-teachers collaborate collectively in a 6:2:2 classroom?
- When are co-teachers productive and what factors support that?
- How does the non-typical form of co-teaching in our classroom support the collaboration between my co-teacher and me?

Study Approach

Throughout my research, I have been working within the comprehensive research strategy of a case study, a qualitative approach that builds an in-depth and contextual understanding of the research that relies on multiple perspective or sources of data (Creswell, Hanson, Plano & Morales, 2007). I have examined data that are reflective in nature and including my own thoughts and perspective as well.

The study was conducted with two other professionals whom I worked with, my co-teacher and mentor teacher. We all worked at a private residential school for students with special needs in western New York. I collected data on collaboration between the three of us, and our co-teaching methods.

One type of data collection is the conversations we had during our joint planning sessions, which I have transcribed for analysis. Another form of data collection used in this study is the observation of contributions of participants in lesson planning. I used a data collection form during planning sessions to track my co-teacher's and my own contributions to our collaboration two to three times a week. Finally, I recorded my own reflections after the teaching of the lesson(s). This has given me an insight into how each participant has contributed and what is the result of that contribution. The following session I asked the participants to share their thoughts on the prior week's lessons on what went well and what they view as needing improvements.

During my data collection, I was able to interview the participants to further gain insight into my colleagues' ideas and beliefs about co-teaching and collaboration. I initially interviewed the participants at the beginning of the data collection period, as well as at the conclusion of the study. This not only revealed their initial stance and perception of collaboration, but by

interviewing twice, I was able to compare answers following their own reflection process. This interview consisted of open-ended questions, designed by myself, serving as a means to engage in a conversation about co-teaching and collaboration.

Rationale

I chose to focus my research on co-teaching, as there is a lack in the research literature of teachers working collaboratively in a non-inclusive classroom. Pearl, et al. (2012) confirm this in their research, saying that the field of education is constantly questioning, due to lack of evidence, the effectiveness of the co-teaching model. Much of the current research reflects a “how-to” approach on co-teaching and less of what is actually taking place in the co-teaching environment.

I selected the participants of this case study based on their proximity for collaboration and co-teaching with myself. My co-teacher is important in this study, as I was curious about how our process of collaboration helps form our co-teaching dynamic. I have also chosen to include our mentor teacher because she also has insight into our collaborative process and is present during our planning sessions.

Co-teaching and collaboration have made such a significant impact in my own teaching career. It appears that there are important elements within this professional relationship that need to be explored further. I can then take what I learn about co-teaching and collaboration to other experiences I have within my teaching career.

Summary

In my classroom, collaboration among professionals is a vital part of my role as an educator. Through this case study, I have examined what it means to collaborate and be a co-

teacher in a 6:2:2 classroom at a residential school for students with special needs. Collaboration is not just the action of putting two teachers in the same room (Murawski & Hughes, 2009); instead, it is a complex relationship among professionals. There are often challenges associated with co-teaching that result in a failure of the model (Charles & Dickens, 2012). Through research-based strategies, these barriers can be resolved.

I am interested in looking at co-teaching, as my experience is that of a unique lens of a useful teaching model often seen in an inclusive classroom. The questions that I have examined in this case study will look at the process and factors that occurred through the collaboration among co-teachers and colleagues. Through multiple forms of data collection, I have examined themes that will help me in answering my main questions.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter, I will recount the history of co-teaching as well as define co-teaching. I will also look at the criticisms and benefits of co-teaching for teachers and students with and without disabilities. Co-teaching involves a complex relationship of roles. In this chapter, I will define and discuss the roles of the special education teacher and general education teacher. I will also discuss how lessons are delivered and what professional development is needed to create balance in a co-taught classroom.

Definition of co-teaching

Through legislation of the Individuals with Disability Education Act of 2004 (IDEA), educators are mandated to increase access to the general education curriculum for learners with a disability (Pearl, et al., 2012; Friend, et al., 2010). In order for this to occur, students are also required to be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (Friend, et al., 2010) so they would be taught alongside their non-disabled peers, thus driving a change in the special education model. As not every general educator is special education certified this leads to a push for a co-teaching model in some classrooms.

Collaboration has long been a staple for special education. This is a necessity due to the fact that many students with disabilities require aides and outside the classroom services such as occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech, or counseling. Collaboration is historically confined to special education and therapeutic settings (Friend, et al., 2010). Having a special educator in the general education classroom helps to bridge that gap and helps coordinate the needs of students with disabilities.

In a typical co-taught classroom, both professionals are licensed and trained in their own field of expertise (Charles & Dickens, 2012; Friend, et al., 2010; Sileo, 2011). Murawski &

Lochner (2010) claim that “co-teaching requires three components: Co-planning, co-instructing and co-assessing” (p. 175). The instructional responsibility is shared within the general education workspace. Co-teaching is the vehicle through which legislation is met while still ensuring individualized instruction for students with special needs (Friend, et al., 2010). This allows all of the children’s needs to be met while in an inclusive classroom environment. Co-teaching is different from the educational models of collaboration and team-teaching. With co-teaching, both educators share academic responsibility for all of the students (Friend, et al., 2010), demonstrating the bond of co-teachers through the investment of the learning of all students no matter what their needs.

For the teachers, co-teaching allows professionals to address all the needs in the classroom. Brown, Howerter, & Morgan (2013) state that with support and training co-teaching can prepare teachers to participate in reflective practices and change or modify lessons if students are not achieving at the desired level. Educators both should participate in monitoring all student progress and constantly be reflecting on the different type of delivery of content material.

In co-taught classrooms, it is essential to include collaboration from all participants involved, including students. Nierengarten (2013) suggested that it is important to encourage student feedback on the performance of teachers as students provide valuable data. By having students’ opinions viewed and acknowledged it also creates a more cohesive environment for example, students feel valued and impactful in the classroom.

Benefits of Co-teaching

The benefit of co-teachers in the classroom is multifold for children with and without disabilities. There has long been a stigma for students with disabilities, and pull out programs

can cause a student to feel isolated and not belonging in their own classroom. Co-teaching for students with disabilities allows students to feel connected, as well as fostering a sense of belonging with their peer group (Friend, et al., 2010). It allows all children to have access to the general curriculum while still receiving individualized instruction (Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011).

Co-teaching allows teachers an opportunity to use one another's areas of expertise to ensure success for all students. Pappamihie (2012) stated that teachers of ELLs (English language learners) prefer the co-teaching model. As general education teachers have a greater opportunity to learn about ESL (English as a second language) methodologies and best practices, and ESL teachers are able to help ELLs take advantage of the general curriculum (2012). This study demonstrated the importance of balance in the classroom and the role collaboration has in co-teachers sharing their different areas of expertise with one another to benefit all students.

While the placement of students with disabilities in a co-taught classroom has benefits for these students, the co-taught classroom also benefits students without disabilities. Every student has needs and the co-teaching model is a reasonable response to keeping up with all the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the instructional needs of diverse students (Friend, et al., 2010). Through this mindset, it makes students with and without disabilities similar in that the instruction that each student receives are individualized to their own learning style.

For students with disabilities placed in an inclusive (both students with and without special needs) classroom, the co-teaching model allows students to have access to the general education curriculum, as well as decreases the teacher to student ratio in the classroom (Fenty & McDuffie-Landrun, 2011). This allows teachers to increase their responsiveness to students as it improves the quality of teaching by doubling the skill set of the teachers in the classroom. Co-

taught classrooms can increase instructional options for all students, increase support for teachers and improve program intensity (Pappamihie, 2012).

Students with disabilities in a co-taught general education classroom allow students to learn alongside their peers in the same classroom. As mandated by legislation, all students are to be placed in the least restrictive environment that is suitable for them (Hoge, Liaupsin, Umbreit, & Ferro, 2014). For students within a co-taught class with IEPs and 504 plans, it is necessary that their needs are met, and this is done through specialized instruction. It is also important for students to work with different abilities because students can also model and encourage other students through different ways of thinking. The co-taught environment can provide both differentiated as well specialized instruction without the student leaving the classroom.

The student's individual needs are easily accommodated within a co-taught classroom (Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011; Murawski & Hughes, 2009; Hepner & Newman, 2010). Tichenor, Heins & Piechura (2000) claim in their study about the views of parents of a student in a co-taught class, that their children demonstrated increases in self-esteem, social skills and academic achievement. These views were attributed to the differences in the team's teaching techniques (2000), and the main reason being that the students were provided with diverse and individualized opportunities for learning.

Special and general education roles in co-teaching

In most co-taught classes, the general education teacher has the expertise in the understanding, structuring and pacing of the curriculum, while the special education teacher has expertise in identifying students' unique learning needs (Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011). Although, throughout my own research and experience, I found that it is also important that the responsibility is not completely divided. It is important that responsibilities be shared between

both the teachers so that the teachers are modeling teamwork and collaboration as well as dismantling the stigma related to segregated teaching (Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011). This not only sends a message to the students about the dynamic of the teachers, but also allows the teachers to fully collaborate and work together.

Collaboration is the desired role for both co-teachers, but it is not always the case. Often time with co-teachers, the supportive special education teacher will take on the role of redirecting students' behaviors or provide additional direction or clarification while the other teacher takes the lead in teaching the class (Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011). This not only sends the wrong message to students, but it also hinders the overall relationship of the two teachers. Conderman, et al. (2009) stated that the process of being a co-teacher is an evolving process that involves a certain amount of openness and mutual admiration. This means that one teacher is not always supposed to lead or take on the role of disciplinary in a fully collaborative co-taught classroom.

One important research-based practice is for administration to respect the roles that co-teachers set up in their classroom. These roles include a significant investment that the teachers are making in their co-taught classroom. Nierengarten (2013) suggested that co-teaching is not just an "add-on" that can be used as a resource when the need arises, such as a substitute. This essential aspect of the co-teaching unit sets the foundation for mutual respect and trust that both professionals are needed in the classroom.

Examples of co-teaching

Much of the research presented on co-teaching is focused towards more of a "how-to" guide. The focus is mostly on suggestions for co-teachers based on previous research or the

author's prior experiences (Scruggs, Mastropieri & McDuffie, 2007). Pearl, et al. (2012) discussed many difficulties associated with co-teaching research. The difficulties include the ability to assign teachers randomly, variability in definitions of roles and the inability to use match samples (2012). There is also a lack of evidence of academic and behavioral outcomes within this field of research (Zigmond & Magera, 2001). This may be due to the difficulties described or to the difficulty of obtaining co-teaching research data. For example, co-teachers may be aware of the dissatisfaction of the classroom environment and may refuse to participate (2001).

Scruggs, et al. (2007) conducted a meta-synthesis of qualitative research on co-teaching in inclusive classrooms. This type of research also allows for the synthesizing of a large number of original reports, each containing its own individual data sources as well as several conclusions to be drawn with evidence from several sources. Scruggs, et al. (2007) concluded two things: one being that there is currently a dominance of the one-lead, one-assist model of co-teaching as well as how administration and teachers identified a number of conditions needed for co-teachers to succeed. These examples included sufficient planning time, compatibility of co-teachers, training and appropriate student skill level (2007). In addition, these trends presented in previous research were necessary for success in a co-taught classroom.

Pearl, et al. (2012) examined, through their five-year study on co-teaching, several implications for all stakeholders to consider. They included 784 co-teachers and 3920 students from 208 schools that participated in a co-teaching project. This project provided support, hands-on learning, professional development sessions and planning sessions to assist with implementation and improvement of co-taught classrooms. Over a five-year timeframe, the co-teaching professional development team worked to develop a co-teaching model that includes

co-teaching implementation and professional development. Some of the implementation examples include, examining how co-teachers assess students, co-teaching structures, flexible grouping patterns, and identifying and addressing the needs in the classroom (2012). The results of this study showed that their professional development model of the implementation and professional development package increased the efficacy of the co-teaching model as it provided positive outcomes for students with disabilities in co-taught classrooms.

Models of instruction in co-taught classes

Co-teaching includes professionals planning and delivering instruction using six different approaches (Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011; Friend, et al., 2010; Sileo, 2011). Each model of co-teaching has its advantages and disadvantages. These models include: one teach/ one assist, station teaching, parallel teaching, alternative teaching, team teaching, and one teach/ one observe (Friend, et al., 2010).

The method often found in research as being the most used and least effective is one teach/one assist (Scruggs, et al., 2007). In this model, there are two teachers in the room, but one teacher has the clear leadership role while the other teacher is walking around the room assisting other students. One disadvantage of this model could be that it automatically puts one teacher in the superior position (Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011). However, if this model is not overused it can serve to provide opportunities to reteach or specialize instruction (Friend, et al. 2010).

The model of one teaches/one observes is similar to the previous model, with the exception that the one teacher is observing and assessing the students while one teacher is leading a lesson. The purpose that the observation teacher serves are to gather data on a student pertaining to academic, social or behavioral information (Friend, et al., 2010). This model has the advantage of obtaining important information that allows teachers to make educated

decisions on what is best for the student, but it also has one teacher silent in the background and the other as the leader.

On the other side, the model of team teaching is when as the co-teachers teach at the same time on the same content (Friend, et al., 2010). This model is can be a challenging model as it requires cooperation and trust on the part of both teachers. Team teaching can also be challenging as teachers are often seen falling into the model of one teach, one observe (Hepner & Newman, 2010). This is seen as one teacher taking the lead and the other observing or supporting the students.

The model of parallel teaching is where the teachers teach the same material at the same time in different parts of the room (Friend, et al., 2010). One advantage is that this model lowers the student-teacher ratio (2010). This model also allows teachers to plan together, but teach based on their own styles of teaching (Hepner & Newman, 2010). The difficulty in this model is making sure that students receive the same content material while allowing teachers flexibility on their own teaching style (Sileo, 2011).

Alternative co-teaching involves the two teachers splitting the class into one larger group and one smaller group (Friend, et al., 2010). This allows for some students in need to have specialized or extra instruction. This model does have the possible disadvantage of causing students to feel marginalized from the larger group of students (Sileo, 2011). There should be variety in the students who are put into the smaller group and the same teacher should not teach the smaller group every time.

For station teaching, teachers work with small groups to present content separately at different locations in the classroom (Friend, et al., 2010). Hepner & Newman (2010) claimed that station teaching requires more planning on the teachers' part since they must know in advance

how they will split up the content. This model also allows for students to work independently or on a differentiated task. One possible disadvantage to this model is the increased level of noise with students working in multiple groups (Sileo, 2011). Another disadvantage with this model is the possibility of creating homogeneous groups and routinely separating the students into high and low achieving groups (Hepner & Newman, 2010).

Within these models, teachers address individual student's IEPs goals and objectives as well as the needs of all learners in the class (Friend, et al., 2010). Depending on these needs and the objectives of the lessons, co-teachers can use the variety of models to fit the needs of all learners. It is important for co-teachers to be trained and aware of all the models of co-teaching that they can implement into the classroom, as well as aware of the advantages and disadvantages of each one. Knowing the needs of students and their own personal styles of teaching is an important factor when deciding the type of model to use for each lesson (Hepner & Newman, 2010).

Supporting co-teachers

For co-teachers, barriers to a successful classroom and co-teaching relationship may include inadequate training, limited sources, scheduling issues, differences in philosophies or personalities, lack of administration support, or unclear roles (Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011). One of the challenges of co-teaching is that the general education teacher is often seen as the lead and special education teacher is seen as the support. The inequality of roles leads to confusion and lack of consistency for students (Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011).

One area of need for co-teachers found in research is the necessity of administrative support for co-teachers. There is significant influence and power that administrators have over establishing and maintaining a collaborative environment (Nichols & Sheffield, 2014). This

includes administrators as guides and mentors, encouraging volunteerism and proper training (Conderman, et al., 2009; Fenty & McDuffie Landrum, 2011). Conderman, et al. (2009) suggested that weak collaboration and communication skills of co-teachers are a common reason for failure. Administrators need to fully support and guide co-teachers through the complex process of building a collaborative classroom.

Co-teaching requires a commitment to the evolution of the collaboration process (Conderman, Johnston-Rodriguez & Hartman, 2009; Sileo, 2011). It is not just about sticking two teachers in the same classroom and having them work together, but making sure that there is cohesion and a partnership of teaching ideals. Conderman, et al. (2009) discussed multiple questions to discuss before, during, and after teaching:

1. Are we willing to teach outside of our comfort zone?
2. How will we individualize instruction?
3. How will we share responsibility within the classroom?
4. How can we assess students as well as our own teaching? (p.3)

These questions allow teachers to discuss whether they have similar goals and teaching pedagogies so that they can successfully work together.

One area of need that determines a successful partnership is the availability of planning time for co-teachers. Common planning time results in more sharing of information, and the minimum requirement is one hour per week plus additional “on the fly” planning (Charles & Dickens, 2012; Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011). During this time, teachers should have an agenda to keep everyone on track, including the roles each teacher will take in the lessons. For general education teachers, their responsibility is to map out the curriculum and special education teachers should focus on the individual needs of the students (Fenty & McDuffie-

Landrum, 2011). Teachers can also plan which model of co-teaching is best for the content they will be presenting, as well as what method they will use for the assessment of the students' knowledge acquisition.

As with many classroom teachers, there is just not enough time in the day to fit everything in. The need for communication skills and sufficient planning time is essential for a successfully co-taught classroom (Charles & Dickens, 2012; Conderman, et al., 2009). One possible solution is Web 2.0 (a term to describe web-based technologies such as blogs, podcasts, wikis and social networks), as these tools are generating new technological ways to collaborate. They offer educators modes to effectively collaborate, create, publish and interact in a web-based environment (Charles & Dickens, 2012). The Web 2.0 resources are available to help alleviate the communication barriers that might be hindering a productive co-taught class.

The more two teachers disagree in their perspectives, increases the likelihood that there is a mismatch of teacher collaboration (Conderman, et al., 2009). It is important to discuss communication style; as teachers address their own style they become more willing to relate, understand and build on collaboration (Conderman, et al., 2009; Sileo, 2011). The challenge is to collaborate not in your own style, but in the style of your co-teacher (Conderman, et al., 2009). This type of communication and preplanning is important for a successful teaching relationship.

Conderman, et al. (2009) stated that there are four styles of communication (directors, socializers, relators, and thinkers), and each has its own strengths and weaknesses. The key to collaborating with others who have different styles than your own is to recognize their style and adjust your style accordingly. Alessandra (2007) emphasized the importance of understanding what drives people and working with them through that perspective. Co-teaching is a relationship that requires both parties to know one another's communication style.

Communicators with director-like qualities are driven by two-things: the need to control and achieve (Alessandra, 2007). For a co-teacher with this style, it might be difficult to share responsibility. For directors, it is also important when discussing lessons to respect the agenda, allow them to make the decisions and maintain a business approach (Conderman, et al., 2009). These people are the most comfortable when they are in charge.

Socializers are those individuals who are friendly, like to be a part of the action, and they work well with others due to their desire to receive praise and admiration from their peers (Alessandra, 2007). For co-teachers it is important to compliment a socializer, do things together and vary the routine (Conderman, et al., 2009). It might also be important for communicators to take time out of their day for social interactions with colleagues.

Relators are good at planning and listening to others (Alessandra, 2007). Working with others allows relators to be great team players. They try to avoid risks with co-teaching, so make sure to make calculated changes and engage in conversations about those changes to minimize the risk involved (Conderman, et al., 2009). Relators will even agree with others when they do not truly agree due to their passive nature, so a trusting relationship among co-teachers is necessary.

Thinkers are problem solvers, systematic and analytical (Alessandra, 2007). They are concerned more with what is going to be taught rather than how it will be taught (Conderman, 2009). Thinkers are often seen as over-critical as they have high expectations for themselves and others (2009). For co-teachers, it is important to be clear on each teacher's role and be prepared and detailed with lesson plans. Thinkers do not like to be surprised and struggle with unexpected events, so being prepared will help alleviate this stressor for thinkers (2009).

In a successfully co-taught classroom, teachers can develop a high level of comfort, complete one another's thoughts and create synergy in the classroom (Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011; Friend, et al., 2010). Co-teaching is a unique professional relationship; both parties must be fully invested. For example, co-teaching is often referred to as a marriage, due to the close professional relationship that forms (Conderman, et al., 2009; Sileo, 2011). Therefore, like any marriage there is a large amount of commitment and compromise required by all involved. This relationship also requires getting to know the other partner and understanding his or her personality, likes and dislikes.

If there is tension between teachers, students sense that and can take advantage of the situation by staff splitting. Staff splitting is setting up one teacher against the other; if the child is successful, it could cause tension between the teachers (Sileo, 2011). When a student senses there is tension they may ask one teacher who says "no" and then moves on to the other who may say "yes". The underlying tensions which are that not all parties are on the same page nor is there neither effective communication nor collaboration between the professionals.

Criticism of co-teaching

Even with resources available, numerous questions still arise when addressing the efficacy of co-teaching (Charles & Dickens, 2012). In the research conducted by Scruggs, et al. (2007), they contrasted how co-teaching should be implemented to how it is documented to work in schools. The idealized model is where the general educator and special educator collaborate as partners, equally sharing classroom responsibility and accountability for student outcomes. In a co-taught model, students are meant to interact with the general educator as well as the special educator.

According to the data, co-teaching does not always resemble the suggested models. One surprising observation was that the typical individualized adaptations and accommodations that special educators provide were rarely seen in co-taught classes (Scruggs, et al., 2007). Having teachers share their expertise is an important part in creating successful co-taught classroom. Knowing that the role of the special education teacher is not valued or utilized suggests that the general educator takes the dominant role in the class (Scruggs, et al., 2007).

Research shows benefits for students placed in a co-taught classroom, including academic achievement (Friend, et al., 2010; Scruggs, et al., 2007; Pearl, et al., 2012). The problem is that research has shown that this academic achievement has not translated to an increase in high-stakes testing situations for students with and without disabilities (Nichols & Sheffield, 2014). This shows that the scores were not affected by the different approach that co-teaching has on the students' education. This insight on the difference of report card scores and standardized tests also brings to light the procedures in which are currently being used to measure the effectiveness of co-teaching (Nichols & Sheffield, 2014).

From the students' perspective, co-teaching allows for increased expertise on different areas and more help is available when needed (Fenty, McDuffie-Landrum & Fisher, 2012; Friend, et al., 2010). Although, students did claim that one of the drawbacks was that students could not get away with anything, the standards were higher than other classes, and that the different perspectives from the teachers created some confusion (Friend, et al., 2010). The ratio of teachers to students has increased allowing there to be more thorough and complete supervision as well as the ability to hold students accountable as learners.

The idea that co-teachers provide multiple perspectives, for students, yielded a positive as well as negative aspect of learning within a co-taught class (Fenty et al., 2012). The positive

aspect was in regards to the fact that students are able to have different styles teaching content, which increases the chances that one of the teacher's perspectives will be clear and accessible (2012). The drawback of the multiple perspectives stems from how there can be confusions from the lack of continuity and cohesive collaboration among co-teachers.

Conclusion

Co-teaching is a form of collaboration that takes the strengths of two teachers to co-plan, co-assess, and co-teach a group of students to meet their individual needs (Friend, et al., 2010). In order for this type of collaboration to be successful, co-teachers must be willing to communicate effectively, establish a common planning time, and use it effectively (Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011). Although there are several barriers to co-teaching, the benefits for students and teachers are well established and researched (Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011; Friend, et al., 2010; Scruggs, et al., 2007). As I progressed through my own study, I have learned about the process of co-teaching and what it takes to collaborate with other teachers.

Chapter Three: Methods and Procedures

The process of co-teaching and collaboration is a complex relationship. As Friend, et al. (2010) suggest the partnership of co-teaching between professional peers with different levels of experience and expertise can be viewed as a reasonable response to the increasing difficulty for one teacher to keep up with all the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the individual needs of the student. Even though the design of my co-teaching experience is unique to the population of students and environment in which we, my co-teacher and I, teach; the use of collaboration is essential for all involved.

As stated in chapter one, the purpose of this qualitative self-study is to help me gain insight to the multiple layers of collaboration in the general term as well as more specifically collaboration in my 6:2:2 co-taught classroom. Through the data analysis and research in this study I have been able to yield insights and perspectives on my research questions:

1. What is the process when co-teachers collaborate collectively in a 6-2-2 classroom?
2. When are co-teachers productive and what are the supportive factors?
3. How does the non-typical form of co-teaching in our classroom support the collaboration between my co-teacher and me?

Context

The school where I have conducted this study is located in western New York in a suburban area. It is a private residential school that is not inclusive of non-disabled peers. The children at this school range in age between 7-21 years of age. Many of the students live on campus at one of the three residential homes. The classes are organized around age and ability,

with the structure being six classes of six students with one to two teachers and two to three teacher's assistants. When students with a disability exhibit ongoing behaviors that prevent learning for themselves or others or pose a significant threat to peers, self, or staff, schools often choose to place these students in alternative educational settings such as this school (Hoge, et al., 2014).

This school is a private residential school that enables staff to address the specific educational needs of our population of students through a high student to staff ratio along with the ability to fit the curriculum to meet the educational needs of the student. As this school is a highly restrictive environment, teachers are constantly evaluating what the students need to learn in order to be successful in a lesser restrictive environment.

The students in this school have a range of disabilities. Many of the students have Autism Spectrum Disorder as well as multiple disabilities including Intellectual Disabilities, among others. Even though there is a range of disabilities, all of the students in this school require an increased amount of supervision and environmental modification to their daily schedules. This allows staff to ensure that there is constant active treatment so students are prepared to be able to move to a lesser restrictive environment within two to three years.

Many of the students are typically paired with one other staff. Often teaching is done individually in the classroom, as the needs of each of the students are so wide. As it stands, these classes are organized based on an age range as opposed to the students' abilities. We have a few cross-classroom groups that were organized based on the needs of the students as well as matching ability.

My classroom consists of six students ranging in age between 17-20 years of age, two teachers, and two teacher's assistants. Three of the students are one to one with staff and the

other three share two staff. Students have different goals that they are working on during the day according to their individualized education program (IEP). Some of the students are working on identifying their own names in print and some are reading at a fourth grade level. The students participate throughout the week in several groups.

The groups are organized within the classroom and between other classrooms based on the students' needs and abilities. One specific group that occurs is for health education and that involves two girls 19 years of age of our class and one girl, 17 years of age, from another class. The girls are learning about necessary information that will help them when they soon move to adult services or a lesser restrictive program.

Through pre-assessments as well as questioning is where we as teachers develop the curriculum and topics we are going to address in this group. We also base the curriculum on how we are progressing through the lessons. If there is confusion or many questions, we may stay on that topic for a couple weeks to be sure that the students understand and retain this important information. There are resources, designed for students with special needs, that we choose from based on what went well in a lesson and what we feel the students could benefit from. One of these resources include Unique Learning System © (2015), which is geared toward students with special needs in the transition level of their education.

The lessons that we teach are discussed in an after school meeting. This is where we collaborate on what the students will need to learn about different topics to be successful when they transition out of our school within one to two years. We often include in these meetings the school counselor as well as the vocational teacher as they include their own areas of expertise into the conversation.

Participants and Positionality

The purpose of this study is to explore aspects of co-teaching and collaboration. I have chosen my co-teacher, my mentor and myself as the participants in this study. With these two other participants, I have been able to examine and reflect upon our methods in both co-teaching and collaboration as well as our navigation through cross-class group work. I was able to use the findings of my study to guide future collaboration among other professionals.

Culturally, I am a Caucasian female in my mid-twenties. I was educated in a suburban school in western New York, where a majority of my classmates were white and middle class. I continued my education at The State University of New York at Brockport where I earned my degree in English Literature and certifications in both childhood education and special education. I am also currently working at the same university on my masters in birth-12th grade literacy education.

My professional career started out with me teaching as a teacher's assistant at the same school where I am currently teaching. I was promoted at the start of the school year to teach in a co-taught classroom for students with disabilities. This was my first teaching job, but I was familiar with many of the students before taking this position as special education teacher.

Through my professional experiences and education, I have developed my own philosophy of education. The first perspective is that regardless of children's backgrounds, their learning is strongly social (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). The learning that takes place for students is not defined by their own internal abilities, but it is a complex process that uses language and social interactions to develop (2009). In my classroom, it may be easier to have every student learning something different on their own, but it is important to realize the value of social

interactions and learning. The impact of social learning for students is profound, as it provides students with different perspectives to form ideas through language.

Students also need to have an opportunity to participate in active and engaging learning. In a book I read about boy writers, the author encouraged boys to write about their interests, even if it involves guns, gore and mystical creatures, as it encouraged engagement in their writing (Fletcher, 2006). This concept can be used for any student with any subject. By having students' interests brought into the classroom, it creates engagement and students are able to connect with the content. One example of this that I have used in my own classroom is with a reluctant reader, and this student has a large collection of National Geographic magazines. He takes pride in his collection and will brag about how many he has added to his collection over the weekend. For assignments, to show that I have respect for his collection and take an interest, I let him use his magazines for school purposes. This allows him to connect with his work as it revolves around an interest of his own.

Additionally, it is my philosophy that all students, no matter their status, have the ability to learn. Looking back at my own funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti & Neff, 1992), I originally had a great difficulty with reading and writing. Through the help of creative and patient teachers, things eventually started to become clear and learning became easier. For my own students, learning is also a struggle and requires "out of the box" thinking to fit their needs. It is through this learning environment that collaboration among teachers is essential. As we not only are modeling what we require of our students, but also are able to pull together our expertise in order to fit the needs of our students.

Data Collection

The purpose of this study was to examine collaboration in a co-taught classroom. In order to do this I looked at collaborative conversations between co-teachers and colleagues, specific qualities or characteristics of our unique co-teaching experience, as well as supporting factors of our collaborative environment. My analysis of this data has allowed me to gain further insight to our classroom collaboration.

Audio Recording of Joint Planning Sessions

I have observed and collected data on our joint planning sessions through audio-recordings, in which I have transcribed select sections for analysis. The sessions took place in our classroom after school for approximately 15 minutes two to three times a week for five weeks. During these sessions, we planned group lessons that we taught in the following week. We have also discussed how the previous week's lessons turned out and what we needed to review and re-teach in future lessons.

Observation

Another form of data collection I used in this study was to observe contributions of participants in lesson planning. I used a data collection form during planning sessions to track my co-teacher and my own contributions to our collaboration two to three times a week for five weeks (Appendix A). I also recorded the description of the lesson plan by describing key elements on the data collection form.

Research Journal and Reflections

On the same observation form, I recorded my own reflections after the teaching of the lesson(s). I looked at how the lesson plan turned out after the teaching of the lesson, what went

well with our planning and what improvements we can make next time. This has given me insight into how each participant is contributing and what is the result of that contribution. The following session I also asked the participants to share their thoughts on the prior weeks' lessons on what went well and what they view as needing improvements.

Interviews

I used interviews to further gain insight into my colleagues' ideas and beliefs about co-teaching and collaboration. I interviewed the participants at the beginning of the data collection period, as well as at the conclusion of the study. This has not only revealed their initial stance and perception of collaboration, but by interviewing twice, I was able to compare answers following their own reflection process. This interview consisted of open-ended questions, designed by myself, serving as a means to engage in a conversation about co-teaching and collaboration (see Appendix B for interview protocol). The interview took 15-20 minutes during our planning time after school. I used a tape recorder to record the interviews.

Data Analysis

At the completion of my data collection process, I transcribed and selectively coded and collapsed the data. Manually, I categorized, sorted and coded all of the information collected. As data analysis is not a linear process, I constantly revisited and reexamined the data collected in order to constantly reassess preliminary interpretations based on new data (Samaras, 2011).

Observations

I reviewed the observation field notes and audio recordings, looking at the different aspects of collaboration and discussion on a weekly basis. I created documents by transcribing audio recordings of the sessions. At the completion of my data collection, I selectively coded and collapsed the data for trends in the process of collaboration, as well as the different factors that

support productivity with collaboration. I engaged in a process of triangulation with the observation data and teacher's reflections as a way to reveal aspects about effective collaboration.

Research Journal and Reflections

As I reflected on my own experiences with collaboration and co-teaching, I made notes in the margins as a preliminary analysis of the data. This has allowed me to see the initial trends forming. At the conclusion of the data collection, I have coded the data into categories that emerged. I have also done this with the reflections that the participants provided. I have done a preliminary analysis of their data and then after all data is collected I then coded the data into categories that emerged. I have also compared and contrasted the reflections of the participants to my own reflections of the sessions.

Interview

I looked at the participants' responses on the first administration of the interview. I used the information I gained from the participants to get an overall sense of the collaboration and co-teaching within our specific environment. I then re-administered the interview after the five weeks of observation and reflections. I then compared and contrasted the participants' pre/ post collaboration and co-teaching views. I looked for themes, patterns, similarities and changes in their responses.

It is important, for qualitative research, to check and establish validity within studies (Diehl & Guion, 2011), and this can be done through the triangulation of data. I was able to triangulate my own data by analyzing my research questions from the multiple perspectives of

data. These different perspectives of data collection include interviews, observations and reflections.

Procedures

Week 1

Monday: Gave the participants the preliminary interview. During this session, I audio recorded the conversations along with notes on the topics discussed. I then reflected on the conversations we had during the session. This planning session involves all participants.

Wednesday: I reflected on the different lessons we have taught and will teach during this week as well as any conversations that we have “on the fly” for lessons being taught. These conversations involved only my co-teacher and me.

Friday: I reflected on all the lessons we taught as a group and any important notes that come to mind.

Week 2

Monday: The participants did a quick 5-10 minute free write on how they felt the last week’s lessons went and the planning process involved. The planning session for this day will be recorded and will include all participants. I then reflected on the conversations we had during the session.

Wednesday: I continued with my reflections for the lessons taught and our interactions. These interactions involved my co-teacher and me.

Friday: I reflected on all the lessons we taught as a group and any important notes that come to mind.

Week 3

Monday: The participants did a quick 5-10 minute free write on how they felt the last week's lessons went and the planning process involved. The planning session for this day will be recorded and will include all participants. I then reflect on the conversations we had during the session.

Wednesday: I continued with my reflections for the lessons taught and our interactions. These interactions will involve my co-teacher and me.

Friday: I reflect on all the lessons we taught as a group and any important notes that come to mind.

Week 4

Monday: The participants did a quick 5-10 minute free write on how they felt the last week's lessons went and the planning process involved. The planning session for this day will be recorded and will include all participants. I then reflect on the conversations we had during the session.

Wednesday: I continued with my reflections for the lessons taught and our interactions. These interactions will involve my co-teacher and me.

Friday: I reflected on all the lessons we taught as a group and any important notes that come to mind.

Week 5

Monday: The participants took their concluding interview, which is the same as the initial one unless different conversations arose and new questions came to mind. During this session, I audio recorded the conversations along with notes on the topics discussed. I then reflected on the conversations we had during the session. This planning session involves all participants.

Wednesday: I reflected on the different lessons we have taught and will teach during this week as well as any conversations that we have on the fly for lessons being taught. These conversations involved only my co-teacher and me.

Friday: I reflected on all the lessons we taught as a group and any important notes that come to mind.

Criteria of Trustworthiness

It is important that I have accurate findings and interpretations of my data for this study. As a teacher-researcher, I conducted this study in an ethical and unbiased manner. It is important that my findings are reported in a credible manner. My data has been collected using a variety of forms: interviews, observations, and reflections. The data collection process of collecting from a variety of sources has increased the credibility of my study through triangulation. I have used my co-teacher, mentor teacher as well as myself to further the credibility of the findings. To further the reliability of my study, I included member check from my research partner, for the process of checking the accuracy of my data and the appropriateness of my coding of the data.

Limitations of the Study

In this research study there were limitations with my design, data collection and analysis of that data. One limitation may be the small number of participants in this study. The study has included three special education teachers, myself included. Another limitation might include the period of research. We often have to reschedule group lessons and meetings based on different events or behaviors of the students. Finally, much of my study has been subjected to my personal interpretation and reflections. As with qualitative research, this will be over come through the criteria mentioned above, such as member checking and triangulation of data.

Summary

Teachers report through their participation in co-teaching an increase in professional collaboration among faculty members (Hepner & Newman, 2010). Collaboration and co-teaching are complex forms of professional relationships and can be difficult to negotiate. As both are embedded in the philosophical ideals of special education, they are critical in helping students with special needs by meeting the needs of other professionals by using their own areas of expertise (Friend, et al., 2010). This study has looked at how co-teachers and collaborating teachers work together in a strictly special education setting to meet the needs of students.

Chapter Four: Analysis of Data

Throughout a six-week data collection period, I followed a multiple subject qualitative design and case study research design (Creswell, Hanson Plano & Morales, 2007). Due to the nature of this study's data, analysis of the data occurred in a variety of ways. Through thorough analysis and triangulation of the qualitative data, I determined themes within my research questions. My first research question: What is the process when co-teachers collaborate collectively in a 6:2:2 classroom? For this question I determined two prominent themes of balancing and communication. The second research question: When are co-teachers productive and what factors support that? These themes included time and administration. Finally, the themes for my third question were combining strengths and environment. These themes help guide me in answering my question: How does the non-typical form of co-teaching in our classroom support the collaboration between my co-teacher and me? The research data analysis is broken up into the different themes as indicated. I have then included a summary of my research question drawing from these themes following my analysis.

Question 1: What is the process when co-teachers collaborate collectively in a 6:2:2 classroom?

As I uncovered themes around my first question about the process of collaboration two distinct themes were apparent Through the use of reflections, interviews and observation notes I was able to uncover two significant themes that demonstrated the process of collaboration in a restrictive educational setting:

Theme 1: Balancing; included balancing work, ideas and individual strengths as collaborators.

Theme 2: Communication; included both the challenges we had and the strengths that were observed.

Below is an analysis of the data, which answers themes one and two of my second research question.

Balancing

Throughout all my analysis of research data collected for this study, I determined a prominent theme for my first question was balancing collaboration along with individual teaching. The participants in this study expressed a need in the process of collaboration around the balancing of ideas, work and individual strengths for a successful experience. I show each of these below.

Table 4.1 below is an outline of the lessons our collaborative team planned on teaching during our six-week health lessons. We outlined the lessons and objectives as a team by highlighting some of the needs of the students and collaborating our ideas of how we can teach each of the lessons. This is an example of how our collaborative team was able to balance the needs of the students and work in each of our individual ideas for this mini-unit.

Balancing Ideas. Throughout the six-week study, in my observations and reflections I gathered data about the different ideas that my colleagues and myself put forward in our lesson planning. I also found this theme within the reflections of the participants. Table 4.1 shows our initial collaboration of what we were planning on completing in our cross-classroom female health group. These lessons were written based on the needs of the students in this group and the progression of content constructed by our previous knowledge of our individual students. Through my observation notes taken during this lesson planning session, I found that being able

to collaborate has allowed us to bounce ideas off of one another to improve ideas and think of different angles to include in the lessons.

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Lesson theme	Male/ female traits and list of difference	Examples of male/ female differences	People we know/ don't know	Categorizing relationships	Label categories with examples	Role playing of how we greet different people
Objective	Students will be able to identify whether the trait is categorized as male or female.	Students will provide examples of differences between males and females.	Students will be able to identify the difference of people they know and people they do not know.	Students will learn about the different relationship categories and match a greeting to each.	Students will place examples of types of relationships in the corresponding category. * Based on student formative assessments the categories were adjusted for better understand.	Students will identify what we say and what we don't say based on the role playing exercise for each of the categories.
<i>Table 4.1:</i> Lesson Outlines. This figure represents the outline of lessons collaboratively composed for week one for a six-week health unit, with notations for planned changes in the schedule.						

In this first lesson planning session, Erin (all names are pseudonyms) reflected that this collaboration had “relieved some stresses because the responsibilities and work are spread out and shared so all the pressure to come up with things are divided” (May 19, 2014). Erin also shared how she was able to spend less time on planning for these lessons and more time with other meetings she said in her interview about how we plan most effectively:

We tried a variety of methods, splitting the work and each teaching different areas, splitting the work and sharing it so we can teach, and planning together all aspects of the work. It was most beneficial when we had the time to plan things and do the work together. Then, we could use each other as a sounding board and make sure that we didn't forget much between the two of us and that we were in agreement about the decisions we were making as we were making them. (May 23, 2014)

We found it important when planning that we complete each part of the planning process together. We were most productive when we were able to share our ideas and follow through with lesson together and as a team. Table 4.1 demonstrates the preplanning our collaborative group constructed week 1. Erin reflected in week 1 "I could see our group planning would be more productive if we came to the group prepared to share ideas and lesson plans with the group" (May 19, 2014). This idea that Erin reflected would allow us as a collaborative group to be more productive and focused.

In my own reflection for this week I noted, "by having this outline available it allowed for us to gather and plan materials according to our lesson objectives and themes" (May 23, 2014). Julia also reflected on idea sharing during week 1. She claimed that the ideas that she shared were easily contributed to the group due to the fact that the group was receptive to everyone's contribution and was honest with their feedback (May 23, 2014). This was supported by my reflection on week 4, when I reflected that the students were confused about the different categories and I voiced my concerns for a rethinking of the relationship types and continuation of the lesson for the following week (June 13, 2014). The other participants agreed and we were able to create a different visual for the students that were more concise and clear with vocabulary. As seen in figure 4.1, we labeled the different types of relationships by color, with

short describers and with visual pictures. This helped the students with different learning needs and allowed for students to construct the different layers with a hands-on approach.

Balancing work. Through the reflections that I gathered and the interviews with the participants, one of the challenging themes that arose was the division of work. Initially I described in my

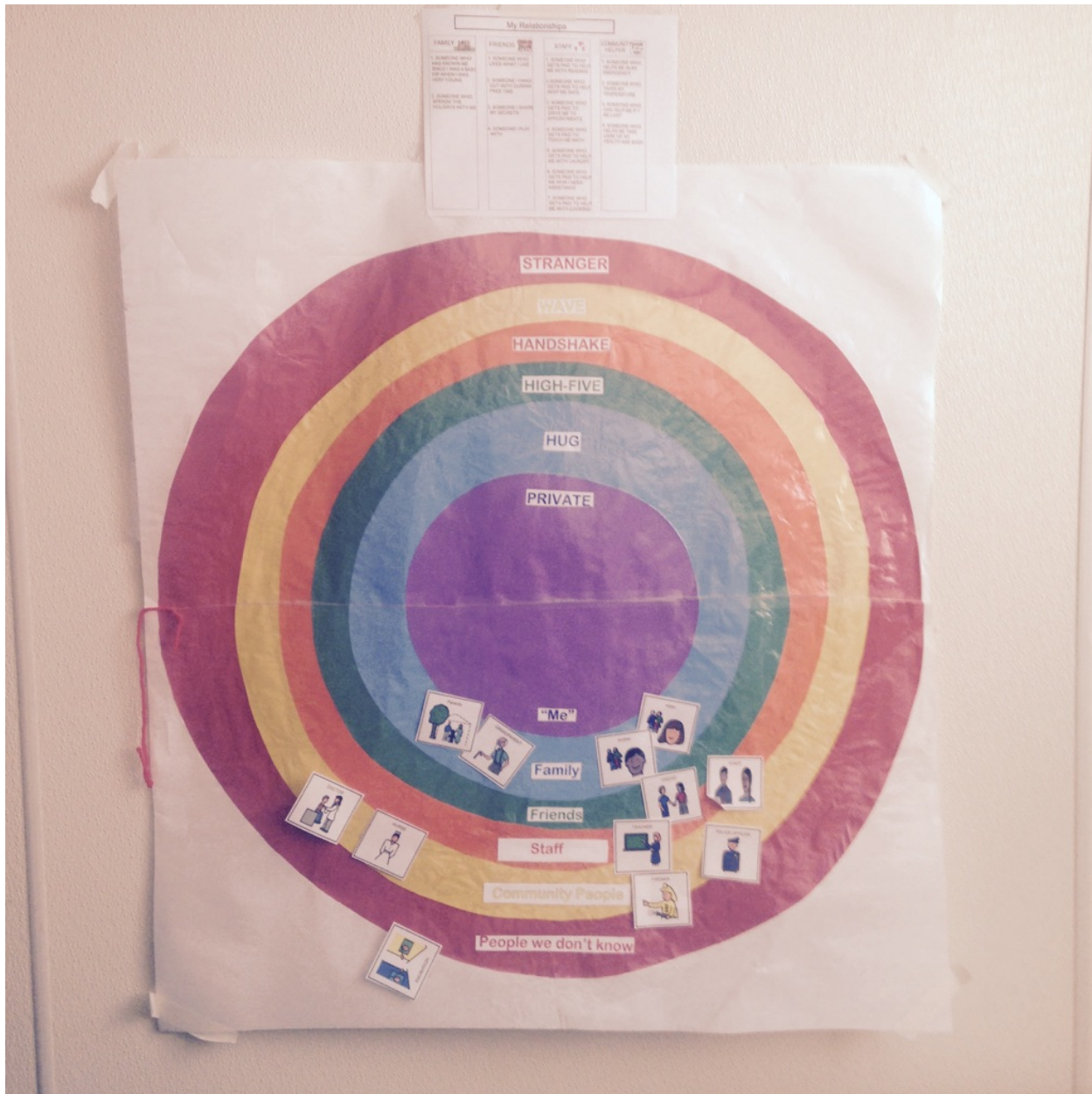


Figure 4.1: Picture of relationship graphic organizer. Used to demonstrate the relationship of the categories of relationships

observation of the planning session during week 1 how we recorded and divided up the work. Each of us wrote in our individual planners what they were going to do for each of the lessons (May 27, 2014). After the initial lesson and reflections from the teachers we found that there was overall confusion about who was doing what part of the lesson. In my reflection for this week I noted that “we each left the planning session with parts of the whole picture written down” and this led to confusion about who was actually supposed to do what (May 23, 2014). In Erin’s week 6 reflection she stated that “strong communication and clear expectations for the work each person is responsible for is key when splitting up the work” (June 25, 2014). This was in response to a question I asked her about one of the things she learned throughout this process about planning and collaborating ideas.

Julia came to me during our initial week about what still needed to be completed prior to the following week’s lesson. We had a quick discussion in her room about the different parts of our first lesson and who was completing each part. This was reflected during her write up for the week. She noted that it seemed “difficult to coordinate the little things like who got the tape and etc.” (May 22, 2014). Julia also noted that it seemed to be confusing as we were not able to keep track of the whole picture. This created an issue about balancing the planning work our collaborative group had worked on as a team.

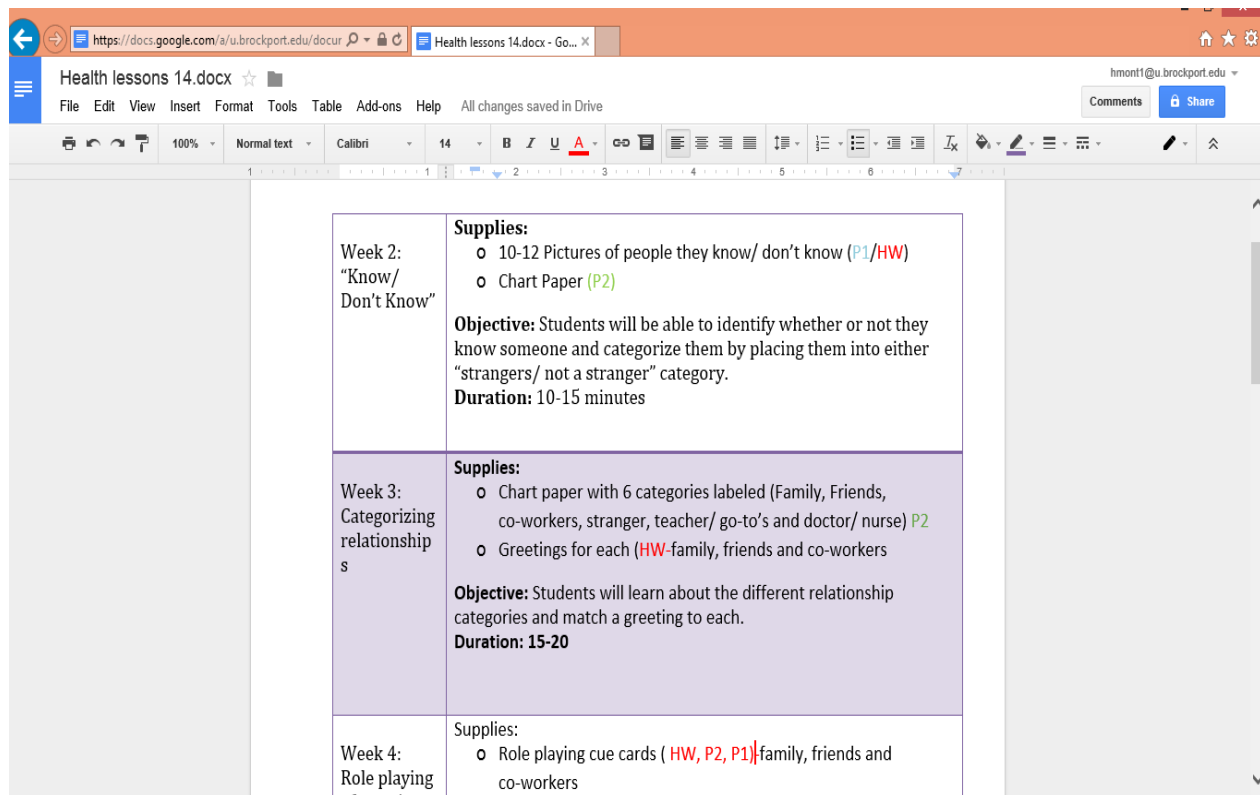


Figure 4.2: This figure is a picture of the Google Doc used through our planning process to organize the work that we assigned during our planning meetings.

One of the solutions that was proposed by Erin during the second lesson planning period was for there to be a Google Doc created for this group where all the participants could access and edit a shared document. As shown in figure 4.2, on this document we would write up the lesson plans as well as who was going to do which part of the planning and instruction. In Week 2's observation I noted that initials were placed next to the task that the teacher voiced that she would complete. Julia shared in her reflection for that week how important it is when collaborating that each one of us is held accountable for the work we share (May 30, 2014). It is not only important to plan collaboratively but also to follow through with the work that is involved to prepare the lesson. During this week's reflection, I noted how it was not only

important to have accountability with the work we assign, but also that the work load is communicated to everyone in the group (May 30, 2014). This tool for our group was able to provide us with the means to organize and communicate the work that needs to be done as well as the objectives we are aiming for during our lessons. Erin also reflected, “I found it helpful when we started using the online document. It allowed everyone to see what needs to be done and what we have planned for the future” (May 30, 2014). By having this shared document, it allowed everyone in the group to have easy accessibility to the work and plans we need to complete.

Balancing individual strengths. The importance of one another’s individual strengths in our collaborative group is shown through the interview answers as well as two of the participants’ observations. Erin claimed in her interview, “I don’t pretend to know everything” (2014). She continued to describe how the other teacher in our group, who had ten plus years’ experience, had taught her programs such as *Handwriting Without Tears* (Olsen, 1997) and *TEACCH® Autism Program* (Schopler & Reichler, 1964). She expressed during week 5’s reflection that without her expertise she would not have been able to successfully place these programs in our shared classroom as neither one of us had gone through the training that this teacher was offered at her previous teaching position (June 20, 2014).

In my own observation and reflection during week 5, we had to make some adjustments based on the students’ needs. While working with a co-teacher in our classroom this type of assessment and adjustment is fairly common as we are often adjusting our curriculum to reteach or skip ahead based on what the student has learned. I noticed that Erin, my co-teacher, had been in tune during the lesson to the confusion that some of our students had been experiencing with the vocabulary presented. After our group lesson, we decided to do a mini lesson in class talking

about the vocabulary and meanings we discussed as a group. This was also revealing about what we needed to change and continue teaching. This individual strength that this teacher demonstrated through her reflection of the students' response was due to the fact that she had been working with these students for almost a whole year and is familiar with their areas of difficulty.

Erin reflected during week 5, that the students were not able to apply the vocabulary describing relationships past the group lesson (June 20, 2014). Erin and I planned on having mini lessons throughout the week re-teaching the vocabulary using visuals and accessible examples. We proceeded to have a conversation about this. Below is a selected portion of our continued conversation. I audio recorded this conversation during our reflective meeting during the week and then transcribed it into my research journal on June 24th, 2014. All names of students and staff were removed.

Erin: So when *Student A* was just talking about [her preferred staff] today I asked her if she was a friend of hers or just a staff? She told me that she wanted to be her (the preferred staff's) friend. I am not sure how to help her understand the difference between staff and friends.

Me: I have had this conversation with her before. I have personally used words like 'we get paid to work here' and 'we can be nice to one another but I am not a friend'. She is having trouble deciphering the difference because we are nice to her like friends and [her peer in the room] is not very nice to her at all.

Erin: We need to make sure that we (all staff who work with *Student A*) are using the same language when we are talking to *Student A* and possibly revisit the lesson we had by adding more emphasis on the difference between the relationships.

Me: They did well with role-playing when we did the lesson last month.

Erin: Yeah, let's do that again.

This discussion Erin and I had about the progress of one of our students allowed us to form a quick assessment on the difficulties one of our students was having with the content of our lesson. We used the conversations we had with the student to make the decision that we needed to review the content we had previously taught and add additional details to the lesson.

Another aspect of individual strength that was observed within this study was during my own observations of our lesson planning. During the first meeting schedule, Julia brought to the meeting some sample health units that she had used in the past. She has had more experience working with students with special needs as well as being a teacher, so she is able to bring to our meetings her experiences and resources. Erin wrote when I asked during her reflection in week 5 (June 18, 2014) on the importance of balancing individual strengths:

Each teacher has different skills, experiences, strengths, areas of interest and background knowledge that they are bringing to the table. Ex- I have no artistic abilities or desire to do crafts and Heather does, so Heather is able to add that component into our classroom that would be lacking if I were on my own (i.e. decorating the door, tie-dye, holiday decorations, and drawing/ adding visuals that help demonstrate or explain concepts to the students).

On a similar theme, Erin and I brought different strengths to our meetings by also having unique backgrounds and skill sets. According to my own reflections during week 4, “when we have the opportunities to discuss what goes on with our students we are able to see what needs they still have and where there are opportunities of growth” (June 11, 2014). The contributions to the group have been reflective of what the students would benefit from learning as many of them are

approaching the transition out of school and into adult services. The students in Erin and my room are a little older than Julia's room so that is often a focus that we guide our teachings.

Communication

Throughout the study, I observed both strengths and challenges in the area of communication. There are often unforeseen obstacles in the classroom, school or home environment. During the study some of the challenges included student behaviors, heavy workloads for the participants, and miscommunication of information. Some of the strengths included openness to share ideas and thoughts and a strong sense of responsibility to the group.

Challenges. One of the uncontrollable aspects of group lessons is that students in this environment are typically placed in this program due to the severity and frequency of their negative behaviors. Often we may have to change a time or day at the last minute due to students who are unable to participate during the regularly scheduled time. During the study, a change in our group lesson had to take place during week 2. All three participants had to communicate 20 minutes prior to rearrange and adjust our meeting time. In my reflection for this week I wrote "we are used to having to quickly make changes in the schedule and communicating those changes with one another. We practice with the students being flexible and recognizing that sometimes students have difficult days" (May 28, 2014). I noted that this type of communication occurred due to our familiarity with the student who was having a difficult time and our flexible environment. Julia noted in week 5's reflection, which was late in the school year, "the kids are having a hard time focusing and staying on task. They are having increased behaviors which are making our scheduled planning time difficult to make. I still push myself to find the time and make our group a priority" (June 20, 2014). It is important to have a consistent teaching time for

the students so they become familiar with our routines and expect that our health group is a normal part of their week.

Another challenge this study revealed was due to it taking place in late spring was that there was a heavy work load and events would be taking place in the following weeks requiring a lot of attention, such as our graduation ceremony. We did meet the required number of times planned but we had to change two of the meeting times due to the participants needing to leave the meeting early or unable to make it to the meeting. These changes occurred during week 1 and week 3. For week 1, we had one of the participants needing to leave early so we changed the interview time to the following morning. During week 3 that same participant could not stay after school that day due to a family situation so the meeting was rescheduled for the following morning. Both of these changes were communicated in advance of the meetings and by word of mouth. It is important, as Julia stated in her reflection, “that we take our planning sessions seriously and make them a priority” (June 20, 2014). It is important to plan, discuss and reflect as a group to better our teaching and collaboration process. We found that it takes a substantial amount of effort to collaborate and plan as a group. It was not just about making the plans to teach, but sharing that workload to be productive co-teachers and collaborators.

Miscommunication of information was one area that all three participants were able to reflect upon and adjust. While we planned during our initial week of the study we realized as we were each carrying out our roles that we were confused on what each person was exactly doing. During the initial reflective session with my co-teacher and me this confusion was expressed. We proceeded to have a conversation about this. Below is a selected portion of our continued conversation. I audio recorded this conversation during week 1 with just Erin and me present and then transcribed it into my research journal on May 20, 2014.

Me: Okay, so I didn't write who was making the t-chart for this lesson.

Erin: I think we were supposed to do that and Julia and you were going to come up with examples during the lesson to go under the boy and girl categories.

Me: I'm not even sure what *Student B* knows about gender.

Erin: You should just ask Julia to do that part it might be easier for her.

As evident in this conversation, we later concluded that there was a problem with our communication and it needed to be addressed. We also decided that it was not productive if we all write our own notes, but that we needed to write collective notes in order to convey clear communication about what we were planning. This was done through a Google Doc that was co-written by all three participants, as seen in figure 4.2. This document communicated the objective for each of our lessons, specific tasks or assessments, and who was designated to complete each portion. As reflected by Julia during week 3 this type of tool has helped to organize our planning thoughts as well as hold one another accountable for our part in the group (June 6, 2014).

Strengths. One of the strengths in communication that I found within the data was the willingness from participants to share their ideas and thoughts during our planning sessions. As noted, the students within our health group are from different classes within our school and we decided to place them in a co-taught peer group due to similarities in abilities and academic levels. This meant that some of the teachers were more familiar with some of the students, and this was important because every participant in our planning group needed to have a voice in order to advocate for the needs of their students. During my observations of our planning sessions I was able to observe multiple instances where this type of advocacy took place. Some examples of this took place during weeks 1 and 2, where we focused on gender differences. I

found that this content was focused on some students more than others, but we were able to set up for all the students what we intended to cover in future weeks. When asked the question, “how does collaboration influence your own teaching Julia shared:

There is a need in this environment to work with a variety of students: It is important to have an environment that is flexible, but also very structured and organized. We always rotated staff so we all got to work with a variety of students, their abilities, and the type of instruction that worked best for them. We all needed to be knowledgeable of our students’ needs and the plans that were made so we could implement the instruction.

(June 25, 2014)

The students in our co-taught class with Erin and me were aware of gender differences, but because some of the other students could use this content Julia suggested that we start at a basic level to reach all of the students. Erin stated in our first planning session, answering the question about where should we start, “I think we should start with an easy concept that the students can understand and relate to, that way the students can be successful and help out some of the other students throughout the lesson” (May 19, 2014). We then decided as a group to focus on gender differences to start building the vocabulary we will be using for relationships.

Another strength that was observed through our communication was a sense of dedication to the group. Through the interview sessions with both Erin and Julia, a similar idea that collaboration and working together to our teaching has had positive outcomes for our own students. Julia shared that “working together collaboratively has given me new ideas for my own classroom” (May 20, 2014) and Erin shared that “having a sounding board to share ideas off of one another creates a huge difference” (May 19, 2014). These statements show that Julia and

Erin both value the process of sharing ideas in our collaborative group to better their own professional growth.

I observed several instances during our planning session of creative thinking taking place to fit our group of learners. As seen in table 4.1, during week 4 we had planned on categorizing the different types of relationships. I noted that week in my observations how Julia shared in our planning discussion the use of a visual to illustrate the different types of relationships. As seen in figure 4.1, there are varying degrees of colors and key words in the shape of a bull's eye to highlight and show significance of the different relationships we have. We initially attempted this idea with the students and after reflection on student understanding we decided as a group to simplify the visual through the language to fit our students' needs. Erin reflected that during this lesson the students seemed confused and were not able to answer follow-up questions during the lesson (May 20, 2014). One example of confusion occurred with the term *staff*. We initially had general visuals for *staff* and labeled them with *teacher*, *teacher's assistant*, and *counselor*. Julia suggested that we instead use actual pictures of staff and students around the school. Julia also stated "that for some of our more concrete learners this will allow them to match up the term to the people" (May 23, 2014). We then changed some of the language and simplified the visual for better student understanding. When asked during her interview about the benefits of sharing work, Erin discussed how "helpful it was to be able to debrief after lessons to give opinions and plan for the future" (May 19, 2014). Some of the questions, Erin explains, that we use in our discussion are:

- Did they get it?
- Should we go over material again?
- Should we explain in a different way?

- Did the lesson highlight other areas that we didn't realize needed to be covered?
- Are we ready to move on to the next topic? (May 19, 2014)

This communication allowed us to provide each other with feedback on our lessons. It was not always a long conversation, but quick discussions about where we are going to go and how the students were learning.

Summary of the first research question

Two of the main themes that I found to answer my first question were balancing skills and communication skills. In the process of collaboration, I found it to be essential in planning to share ideas and bring individual strengths into the group. Encouraging each other to use our experiences and background knowledge of a subject allowed for the group to benefit from each individual. Sharing ideas also requires an open mind set of everyone's voice within the co-taught classroom.

The process of co-teachers collaborating involves effective communication. In a 6:2:2 classroom, there are often changes in schedules and plans. Therefore, it is important that any changes in plans be transferred to all parties and individuals demonstrate a certain amount of flexibility with these changes. This is an important logistic of co-teaching that can be figured out as a pre-planning strategy. Communication also involves the transfer of ideas and needs of the students to the collaborative group. This is also an important step in the process of collaborating collectively as it allows each member of the group to have a clear picture of what each participant needs from the group and how they are contributing.

Question 2: When are co-teachers productive and what factors support that?

When looking at the question about what makes co-teachers productive, I examined the aspects of my data that focused on areas of strength and growth for our collaboration team.

Through the use of reflections, interviews and observation notes I was able to uncover two significant themes that demonstrated the factors that support productive co-teachers and collaboration:

Theme 1: Time

Theme 2: Administration; through pulling resources and promoting collaboration

Below is an analysis of the data, which answers themes one and two of my second research question.

Time

The theme of time during this study was reflected within my observations during the lesson planning. Time was also a theme for both participants when answering the question in the interview about difficulties experienced with co-teaching and collaboration. Erin expressed that “scheduling and finding free time to get together is often the hardest part of collaborating with colleagues” (May 19, 2014). We had worked together to construct a schedule of time for planning and reflecting on the lessons as a group. In a reflection, Erin stated about what is important in our group:

Finding time and making our group a priority: meeting before school to plan, after school to debrief and start planning for the next, weekly planning meetings for cross-classroom lessons, major classroom changes over breaks or plan them together and divide up the work. We both had to make sacrifices to make the planning work. We trusted each other to do our parts. Sometimes someone did more work than the other on one task, but the other would do more work on another task. It always balanced out in the end and we respected each other enough to always share the work. (June 25, 2014)

All three of us originally agreed to meeting after school on Monday mornings for our planning session and reflections from our previous lessons. On Wednesdays, I would reflect with my co-teacher, Erin. This was our schedule, but we had also realized that collaboration and co-teaching requires more than two sessions a week.

As noted in my observations of our planning, on the day of the lessons we would check up on with one another and confirm that we would have everything ready as well as follow-up with informal meetings about student behavior and understanding during the lesson at the start of each planning session. This allowed us to reflect on any re-teaching moments or what might have went well. One example was seen during week 3; the students participated in some role-playing about the different types of relationships. Julia noted during our planning session that this was an engaging activity for the students and allowed for the students to be motivated in participating during the entire lesson (June 2, 2014). She also noted that this would be a good activity to use in the future because the students liked it so much.

My co-teacher and I would also talk daily about the progress of the lessons and things we wanted to improve on within the lessons and our own teaching. In my own reflection about what we spent a majority of time focusing on in our discussions, we significantly focused on the progress of the students, as well as what we could do better to support their learning. These reflections of our own teachings, I noted were “supportive, honest and informative” (June 11, 2014). During one conversation, I stated that “Tuesday’s lesson seemed to be okay, until Erin and I asked the girls follow-up questions later that day about the vocab we used and they still seemed confused” (June 9, 2014). I noted that we talked about how lesson 4 seemed to be challenging for the students and we had not set the stage for the type of vocabulary we were using during the lesson (June 9, 2014). Julia stated in the following week’s planning session as

Erin and I brought to her attention our concerns, “it might be helpful if we used some vocabulary pre-teaching strategies to prepare *Student A* and *Student B* for the lessons” (June 16, 2014). We discussed different pre-teaching strategies we could use in the future so the students would be successful and supportive in our group environment.

It was much easier for us to communicate due to Erin and my proximity and similar availability of time. Julia was available to talk before school but had a different schedule during the day as well as after school. We would fill Julia in on important details and discoveries we had made at our Monday planning sessions.

Administration

Through my analysis of the data collected, one of the themes that reoccurred was the impact of our school administration and staff on our collaboration and co-teaching environment. First of all, in order to start this particular group, we consulted our school psychologist as per advice from our school’s IEP Coordinator. Some of our students have unique sensitive situations that might be cause for different wordings or approaches to health education. Erin shared during her interview about the process of collaboration that “working with clinicians and administration to pull resources together is crucial” (May 19, 2014). With the collaboration and support from our school’s clinicians we were able to ensure that the content we presented was carried across services. For example, Julia’s idea of using the term staff to define the people the girls work with at school has been a term that anyone working with the girls use to describe their relationship. Julia stated in our planning session “we should use consistent visuals and language throughout the girls’ day” (May 23, 2014). We also used the school psychologist for her office location as well as resources she had on relationships and the type of language we should use. We decided to use this location, as noted on week 1’s observation, because of its neutral location and privacy. It

is a smaller room that allows for the students to sit comfortably and close without distractions from peers.

Pulling Resources. One area of need that was discussed during the interview with Julia was that one of the factors that supported collaboration was that we need to have more curriculum resources available to support our planning (May 20, 2014). We had asked administration to fund additional lesson resources to support our health curriculum. We do have a school health curriculum that is available, but it is not completely supportive of the focus of our group. Julia stated in her interview, “We are not a typical education program, we focus a ton on individualizing our students’ educations, but we still need materials to pull from and could use that support from our building’s administration” (May 20, 2014). When asked as a follow up question about our current health curriculum Julia continued with, “the health curriculum we have now is geared for higher functioning students who have had *normal* life experiences” (May 20, 2014). Julia is referring to our school having students who are mostly residentially placed and do not have the typical at home or peer to peer relationships whom the curriculum refers to throughout its examples and activities. Therefore, we have not been using this health curriculum as a school because teachers have found it inappropriate for our students and their development.

Another area of need that Erin had addressed in her interview was how administration should push for shared planning time during the day, as well as substitutes during meetings to cover our room (May 19, 2014). As I wrote in my initial reflection, our planning time is conducted after students have left for the day (May 22, 2014). For meetings, such as a Committee on Special Education (CSE) and residential support, they are typically scheduled within the school day and only one of us is able to attend. We have a lack of extra staff within our building to cover both of our absences and administration assumes that only one of us are

needed to attend these meetings. We have found that as both of us work with the students it would be beneficial for both of us to contribute and participate during meetings involving the students. Erin expressed in her interview that “our administration is very supportive of our co-teaching model. Although we are not the type of co-teachers who split up the work, we are most effective when we plan together and have those opportunities to chat with one another” (May 19, 2014). I also mentioned in a reflective conversation with Erin that “it is sometimes hard going into CSE’s without both of us present because together we are able to paint a better picture of their child when we both give our thoughts” (May 28, 2014). This philosophy of our co-taught classroom is important to the function of our collaboration as we both feel it is important to be involved in all aspects of our students.

I also observed how our selection of which co-teacher would teach the lesson was based on availability, as the ratio of students to staff should never exceed 3:1. It is not possible for both of us to participate in the teaching of the lessons. Erin also shared during her interview how important it is that co-teachers be viewed by administration as a team rather than two people splitting a position (May 19, 2014). Administration struggled with supporting our collaborative health group because they did not provide us additional staff. During our scheduled health group one of us had to teach the girls’ group while the other had to be in the classroom instructing the other students. Julia shared in her final reflection about one area that she would have liked improved: “I found that we did not always have the big picture of what the students’ needed for learning because we were not always present for quick observations and assessments during the lessons. We heard a lot second hand on how the students were coming along” (June 25, 2014). It would have been beneficial for administration to show they were supportive of the fact that we

are collaborating and demonstrate to us, through additional staff, how valued our co-teaching relationship is to our school's program.

Promoting collaboration. The support for collaboration across classrooms is shown through the classroom structure. During my reflection, I noted the diversity that is shown between our two classrooms as well as within our classrooms. In week 4's reflection I wrote, "Julia's student is higher functioning and needs functional academics and she has been increasing her independence throughout this year. Erin and my students are lower functioning and require more basic background knowledge to build the necessary skills (May 11, 2014). We do not base the placement of students in the classes solely on ability, but several factors including behavioral needs. Therefore, it is important and stressed by the administration to collaborate with different classrooms to create learning groups that fit the social and academic needs of the students. Julia shared in her interview that it is important to "socialize students together and get them used to other people and working in a group based on their abilities" (May 20, 2014). When students are placed at our school it is putting them in a highly restrictive environment, and the main goal is to prepare our students so they can become successful in the least restrictive environment suitable for them. In order for them to be successful, students need to be able to work and learn with peers and this is a main philosophical belief of our administration and staff. Julia also shared in her interview, how the environment we work in allows us to have flexibility with our teaching and create learning groups that support our students' needs (May 20, 2014).

One of the reasons Erin and I were placed in a co-taught classroom was because we both benefited from having the support of one another as we were new teachers. Administration supported our collaboration because we both had things to learn from one another. Erin shared during her interview:

We are able to accomplish more as co-teachers. More materials being made, paperwork is completed quicker, more ideas for lessons field trips, and activities. There are also more eyes to observe students and to evaluate their progress, and more background knowledge from the two teachers' life experiences to draw from. (May 19, 2014)

We were also placed with a mentor teacher through our school principal in order for her to share resources and for us to ask questions. Julia stated in her interview when asked a follow-up question about why she thought our collaborative group was needed, "honestly, some of my students have goals in their education plans to participate in a weekly health lesson and I was never really sure how to follow through with this goal in a meaningful ways" (May 20, 2014). We ended up having our collaborative groups because we learned that each of us had strengths and could share what we know in order to plan our health group.

Summary of the second research question

Through this study I found two themes that were prevalent with productive co-teachers and collaboration in general. The first theme is time and the scheduling of when and how we were going to have that shared collaboration within our classroom. Scheduling and rescheduling had been an area that our group had struggled with as arranging three teachers together at one location seemed to be challenging. On the other side, it is a factor that supports productive collaboration as it is necessary to find the time to discuss and make plans. During this study we did have to be flexible with changes of our schedules and conflicts with student behaviors, but we did make it a priority in our schedule to make the time.

Co-teachers and collaborators are also productive when they have the support of administration. One example that I found within this study is how the content of our lessons were

carried across services and the language and vocabulary we were teaching the students was consistently being used throughout the school. This provides the students with carryover and the ability to see how important and applicable what they are learning is outside of the classroom. Resources were also gathered from clinicians to support our collaboration as well as consultations on the content we were teaching. Collaboration has been increasingly supported throughout our school environment as administration has seen the positive impact it has on student outcomes.

Question 3: How does the non-typical form of co-teaching in our classroom support the collaboration between my co-teacher and me?

Throughout this study I examined the collaboration and co-teaching relationship of my co-teacher, mentor teacher and myself. The question above addressed the fact that our learning environment is a non-typical setting and we are both special education teachers meeting the needs of students with disabilities. The analysis of my data from reflections, interviews and observation notes revealed two significant themes that impact the collaboration within our co-taught classroom:

Theme 1: Environment

Theme 2: Combining strengths as co-teachers

Below is an analysis of the data, which illustrates themes one and two for my third research question.

Environment

As I have noted previously, the environment I have focused my study within is unique. The co-teaching model is typically a special educator and general educator model, but both my co-teacher and I are special education teachers. We are also working exclusively with students

with disabilities in a highly restrictive environment. One of the main goals for these students is to prepare them to transition to a placement in a less restrictive environment. During my observation of our planning sessions, I noted that the following conversations reflected our goal as educators to prepare our students with skills to be successful in the least restrictive environment (LRE) including supporting our students with functional academics. The following conversation took place during week 3:

Julia: I think we need to move on from gender.

Erin: Yeah, I think they did really good with those lessons.

Me: So, when I took *Student B* to Wegmans yesterday the cashier asked how she was doing and she started to talk about her recent home visit so I think we really need to move on and talk about what we share with different individuals.

Julia: Yeah *student C* has come a long way with asking people before giving hugs but she can still be super inappropriate with everyone, she would benefit from those skills as well. (June 2, 2014)

During this planning session we concluded that we need to decipher the difference between types of relationships we have and what is appropriate with those relationships. This focus benefits the students as it is a functional lesson that will give the students independence in their future. The focus in this learning environment is preparing students to be as independent as possible in within society. Having the skills to communicate with strangers is an important part of learning about relationships.

During week 4, we started our focus on categorizing relationships. As stated in the conversation above, the need for this lesson came about as some of our students had a difficulty distinguishing the difference between staff and friends, as well as communicating with

community workers or strangers. It is important within our learning environment to focus with the students on being as independent as possible. Therefore, it is essential to have the students learn about health education. Kim stated in her interview, “Some areas that the students really need to be educated on are social interactions and health education. Some of these students have been in a residential placement most of their school years and these students often lack those skills that they might have acquired in a typical school experience” (May 19, 2014). The lesson we taught focused on labeling the categories and adding an appropriate gesture for each type of relationship (ex. Friends give high-fives). In Julia’s reflection of this lesson, she concluded that the students did not initially understand the concept that we presented (June 16, 2014). The lesson was based on a model given to us by our school psychologist. The relationship model had the students in the middle of the circle with varying levels of relationships surrounding based on their proximity to the individual in the middle (See figure 4.1). Strangers were on the outer shell as we know them the least and have the least communication with them. We thought this visual was accessible, but we did need to adjust the language and visuals associated with the vocabulary to fit the needs of our students. We found as a group that it is an important skill to revisit and clarify. For many of the learners in this environment it is important to teach the skills necessary to function within society and communicate in a safe and appropriate way within the community. This is because we are trying to have the students placed within a lesser restrictive environment within a few years of attending this school.

The environment we are working within has given us as professionals the opportunity to work with a variety of learners. Erin suggested during her reflection in lesson 5, that the opportunities we have had to work with students from different classrooms and with different abilities has allowed for her to differentiate instruction as our learners within this group have

varying degrees of learning needs and it is important to make those accommodations for understanding (June 20, 2014). Julia shared in her final reflection:

It is important to have an environment that is flexible, but also very structured and organized. We always rotated staff so we all got to work with a variety of students, their abilities, and the type of instruction that worked best for them. We both needed to be knowledgeable of our students' needs and the plans that were made so we could implement the instruction and also teach our TAs how to instruct the students. (June 27, 2014)

Making sure that Erin and I are able to work with all the students and make notes on their daily progress is a priority for us as educators. We not only learn about the needs of the students, but it allows us to reflect on the teaching environment and what areas are working and what areas may need a change or improvements.

One of the goals Erin and I have had in our co-taught classroom is to share the learning environment and constantly have opportunities to work with all students within our room as well as school. Julia had shared in her observation notes, "I noticed that by working with other students some areas for me to work on as a teacher... One example would have been working with *Student A*. I really needed to watch the language I used to describe and how I presented some of the directions for activities" (June 4, 2014). Julia further described how she would have changed how she presented some of the activities and added visuals to support those directions. By working with all students we become more knowledgeable about the needs and opportunities for the students. In this environment, many of the students receive one on one instruction or small group instruction so being able to observe the work and interactions that all the students

are experiencing allows us as educators to make key observations about the teaching or behavioral strategies used.

The environment in which we work is a team-centered approach, as not one of us would have had all the knowledge to create these lessons without the help of other individuals. The students within the school have a wide diversity learning needs and behaviors and this requires creativity and a variety of learning strategies within the classroom. In her interview, Julia shared “by working and collaborating with other teachers it pushes me to try new things and has given me new ideas to use in my own classroom” (May 20, 2014). This shows that having collaborative partners within this environment is important to our growth and learning as educators. As Erin and I started our co-teaching relationship we did not originally teach health education in this manner; instead we borrowed curriculum from the previous teacher as we were not sure where we should begin nor what topics should be the focus. By having the sounding board that Erin mentions in her interview we have been able to collaborate our ideas and come up with what the students need to learn and ways that we can approach these topics. During Julia’s reflection she stated that she has “found that teaching is not about being right or knowing all the answers. It is about being open to my own learning for the benefit of my students” (June 27, 2014). Julia, having been our seasoned teacher of the group, had opportunities to learn and grow as well in our collaborative group. Julia describes in her final reflection, “I have found myself using some of the visuals and learning strategies that we used in our group...My favorite ones to use recently have been social stories and role-playing” (June 24, 2014). This illustrates that within our teaching environment collaboration has provided our collaborative group important opportunities to share teaching strategies and styles of learning. Collaborating in this

environment has created a reciprocal learning circle for Julia, Erin and myself to explore new ideas and learn off of one another.

Combining strengths as co-teachers

Throughout my research study there were several instances that highlighted the fact that each one of the participants had a strength and was bringing that element to our collaboration group. Initially, Erin and I reflected on the fact that our collaboration as co-teachers is strong because of our own diverse backgrounds. In that conversation Erin stated, “I think this team works because of how no one is considered ahead of the other and we all have our own perspectives and ideas to share with one another” (May 28, 2014). Erin also mentioned in her interview, “having a co-teacher to share a classroom with has provided me with more resources to pull from and a person to reflect and share ideas” (May 19, 2014). Through my own observations of our lesson planning an example of this came up when Erin and I had been given an opportunity to work with students from other classrooms. As this has been my first time working with students with disabilities, my experience working with a range of disabilities has also been limited. Some of the students from other classrooms have different diagnoses than the students in my own and require different approaches than what I have been used to working with. Erin has had more experience with a wider range of students as she has previously worked in this school for a few years as a teacher’s assistant.

As we planned our lessons, I noticed that Julia had mentioned some learning strategies that I have not yet tried within my classroom. For example, during week 3 Julia suggested we write a social story about strangers and how we talk to people we are not familiar with (June 2, 2014). I learned that this strategy is great for students with Autism or concrete thinkers who have difficulties generalizing. Erin and I also learned that within our classroom role playing is a great

learning strategy that is both engaging and helps students empathize with the roles they are portraying.

Although, Erin and I had been combining our own experiences in our co-taught classroom, there is still plenty in which we do not know as we are both new to this teaching role. Erin stated in her week 5 reflection, “it has been nice to have someone to fill in the gaps with as I may miss something or lack the knowledge or experience that is needed for that element” (June 15, 2014). Our mentor teacher, Julia has been teaching for several years and has had extensive training in programs and curriculum that we pull from for our daily lessons. She has supplied our classroom with great resources and knowledge. During our planning meeting, however I initially thought that it might be difficult to express our, my co-teacher and my own, ideas but in my reflection during week 6 I had mentioned “one positive thing that has come out of our collaboration group is the exchange of knowledge being truly an exchange” (June 27, 2014).

There was not one person in the group who had all the answers or did all the work, but instead all ideas were valued and examined. When asked a follow up question about the importance of balancing individual strengths, Julia replied “I have a background working for BOCES and have been trained in ABA that we use with *Student C*. You were in school more recently than me so you have more knowledge of more recent programs and literacy resources that you learned about in her classes” (May 19, 2014). From my perspective as well, I come fresh out of my college education with new and research based ideas, Erin has had lots of experience with the students we are working with and Julia has the resources and special education background. Bringing together these backgrounds allowed us to value one another’s voice and collaborate as colleagues working towards a similar goal.

Summary of the third research question

The two factors I have found that answer this question through my data analysis are the environmental factors and combining strengths of all the participants. On a positive note, the unique environment of our school has allowed us as co-teachers the ability to use what strengths we have to make up for our lack of experience. The collaboration between co-teachers has also opened doors to collaborating with clinicians, other teachers and administration. The areas I found we struggled the most as co-teachers is the overall buy-in of administration of our goal as co-teachers to fully collaborate and not just split work. Administration has supported our classroom philosophy of collaboration and working as a team, but has not always supplied us with the resources to complete that goal. By splitting us up and not supplying a substitute for meetings leaves us struggling with catching the other teacher up and finding that co-planning time to work together.

Our combining of strengths in this co-taught classroom has significantly benefited our confidence as educators. We are both newer teachers and by having the support and knowledge of another professional it allows us to take risks and try new things within our classroom. We are also able to have that person to reflect and talk through issues or challenges we may have who is in the classroom on a daily basis. We have seen throughout this study that we both still do not have all the answers, but co-teaching has made us better collaborator and willing to seek out other professionals who can also provide new ideas and reflections for our growth as teachers.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

Co-teaching and collaboration involves a dynamic working relationship with multiple factors that both, support and hinder the progress of teachers. (Conderman, et al., 2009; Friend, et al., 2010). Collaboration amongst teachers is a great tool which provides the ability to teach and plan lessons in a way that greatly benefits students with special needs. (Friend, et al., 2010; Pappamihel, 2012). In our school, we use co-teaching and collaboration to fit the needs of our students by combining our resources to structure a health lesson group. The health group helps aid in the transition process for students who are progressing into adult services or placements in which the environmental restrictions are less.

The function of this study was to answer three research questions regarding co-teaching and collaboration in a high-needs classroom environment. Analysis of survey data, interviews and observational notes gave insight into how collaboration and co-teaching function within a high-needs environment. These tools within the study provided a triangulation of data. My research questions were:

1. What is the process when co-teachers collaborate collectively in a 6:2:2 classroom?
2. When are co-teachers productive and what factors support that?
3. How does the non-typical form of co-teaching in our classroom support the collaboration between my co-teacher and me?

Conclusions

This chapter will focus on the conclusions I have made based on the findings of the study. I will discuss what it takes for co-teachers to collaborate collectively in a classroom. As well as the factors that support productive co-teachers. Then, how our particular environment has

supported collaboration for my co-teacher and me. Lastly, I will share student and teacher implications, recommendations for further research as well as final thoughts from the study.

The importance of having a balanced relationship

One of the more prominent trends of this study revolved around the relationship of co-teaching. Co-teaching is viewed as a ‘professional marriage’ due to the close working relationship between two responsible and equal parties with different types of expertise (Friend, et al., 2010, p.3). Analysis of the data showed that in order for there to be a collective relationship it is important that ideas are shared and supported by all individuals. Julia noted during her first week of supervision that collaboration, when coupled with honest feedback, made it easier to add even her own ideas into the group’s discussion (May 19, 2014). This positive and honest relationship amongst group members has made collaboration both productive and effective.

As we started planning and implementing our health lessons, as a group we noticed we lost focus on organization and were not allocating enough of our time to improve it. Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum suggest having an agenda for planning sessions used to map out what needs to be done and how the content will be taught (2011). When our group came to the conclusion of mapping out our lesson plans collectively is when we were able to be productive in our planning. We achieved this by creating a shared document which labeled and delegated responsibility for what needs to be completed for each lesson. I noted in the week 2’s reflection the benefits of having this shared document and how it creates a sense of responsibility and accountability for completing our part within the group, as assigned roles are accessible to all individuals within the group.

It seems one important philosophy behind co-teaching and collaboration is it fills the need of the growing demand on teachers to know more and achieve more with their students by combining the strengths of multiple professionals (Friend, et al., 2010). By combining our individual strengths as teachers, we have been able to achieve teaching a health curriculum to students with special needs. In Erin's interview she admitted she was not an expert in everything and co-teaching has given her a platform to work through problems and share ideas (May 19, 2014). The co-teaching relationship is different than that of a paraprofessional, administrator or volunteer, because with co-teaching the investment is equal and both teachers are sharing the same responsibilities to the students (Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011).

In our collaborative group, we all have different amounts of experience and come from different educational backgrounds. Julia, our mentor teacher, often brought to our group some of the lessons that she had used previously used or materials that she had in her room. She has been teaching for over 10-years and has more experience because Erin and I have been teaching for less than one year together. Erin has worked in this school for over three years and has worked as a teacher's assistant with a variety of students, including all of our girls in our health group. She was often in-tune to the academic and behavioral needs that arose during this study. For example, Erin had suggested during week 5 to introduce new vocabulary about the different types of relationships. From my own observation, I noted a particular lesson on relationship types which brought about noticeable confusion with some students due to the difficulty of vocabulary. We decided to adjust the level of difficulty as to make the lesson more understandable and beneficial for the students. From this experience it became clear how important combining different abilities in collaboration can help fill gaps and meet students' needs.

The necessity of effective communication

Communication in this study continuously popped up as being both a challenge and a necessity. Co-teachers, in their professional relationships, need to know what their partners need, think, feel and do in order to provide effective instruction (Conderman, et. al., 2009). The challenge with communication that our collaboration group found within this study was with the organization of ideas and lesson plans. Initially, as a collective group of teachers, one of the main obstacles we discovered was that there had not been established a way to track and delegate what each of us was preparing for the lesson. To overcome this obstacle of a lack of communication we established a Google Doc that kept a running dialogue of our meeting notes, as well as the delegation of tasks to be completed by each group member. In week 3, Julia noted how this newly established means of communication allowed us to hold one another accountable for the work within our group (June 6, 2014).

Communication was also a tool that our group embraced during some of the most challenging aspects of our school environment. Hepner and Newman (2010) stated “effective co-teaching requires constant communication, collaboration, and reflection” (p. 11). It is important when collaborating to value the time and communication efforts that team members put forward. This study was conducted at the end of the school year. We had prescheduled the meeting times and interview sessions, but we had to be flexible and on occasion reschedule our meetings due to conflicts. During week 1 and 3, we had changes in our scheduled meeting times which required us to move the time to a more convenient time for all members.

One strength of our collaborative communication revolved around our willingness to share ideas. Even though our experiences and educational backgrounds differ, we collaborated as a team and respected one another’s ideas. In Erin’s interview she shared how our group allowed

her to have a platform to share her ideas (May 19, 2014). Conderman, et al. (2009) noted that “understanding and respecting each other’s preferred mode and method of communication fosters mutual respect, reduces the likelihood of being misunderstood, and maximizes collaboration” (p.4). In my own reflection, I shared how beneficial it is to brainstorm within a collaborative group that is supportive of one another and views you as an equal.

The importance of finding the time to collaborate

In our specific school environment, we do not typically get planning periods when students go to specials or clinical sessions. Due to the fact the staff to student ratio needs to remain fairly high (2:1) we accompany students throughout the day. This need for keeping a constant ratio leads to before or after school as being the best time to plan lessons. In Erin’s reflection, she stated how one of the most difficult aspects of collaboration is finding the time to meet with one another (May 20, 2014). I found that even though we did have to reschedule a couple times and catch each other during free moments we still were able to plan and reflect each week. In a study presented by Friend et al. (2010), they claimed that the instructional time was spent in large groups and that “co-teachers have little preparation time for their roles” (p.8). It is important when collaborating that one another’s time is valued and each individual supports the collaborative team enough to make the time to be there.

Another important aspect of co-teaching Erin and I shared was finding the time to support our classroom’s ongoing formative assessment on the students’ learning and progression through our lessons. In a review of literature researched by Fenty and McDuffie-Landrum (2011), they noted that if co-teachers had shared planning time and on-going reflective discussions about their students it impacted the amount of time teachers spent sharing responsibilities within the classroom (p.3). In a co-taught classroom, it is important to take the time to share the findings of

these assessments, as the formative assessments are often on-the-fly and both partners may or may not be present during them. An example of this occurred during week 4 when the students learned about different types of relationships such as strangers, community workers, and acquaintances. We provided the students with specific examples of each, but we found that the labeling vocabulary was not accessible to our girls through comprehension questions that were asked after the lesson (June 13, 2014). During Erin's and my quick conversation recorded within week 4's reflection, Erin stated "the girls aren't understanding what we want them to get because they are not understanding the vocabulary we used to describe the relationships" (June 6, 2014). This was a quick assessment based off of questions asked and the girls' responses to those questions. We ended the conversation in that moment and decided in the next planning session to rename some of the relationship categories so the students would have a better understanding of the focus of our content.

Administrative support is important for teacher collaboration

Throughout this study, administration had a significant presence with the function of our group. As we form our classes at the beginning of the year we do not always consider academic peers for our students, but rather focus greatly on the behavioral needs of our students. That being said, administration is one of the driving forces behind having learning groups based on the students' academic and social needs between classes. Our administration and clinical team have supported and supplied our collaborative team with resources and strategies. For example, the format for week 5's relationship graphic organizer was an idea from our school's psychologist.

Within the study, administration had also shown that they valued the co-teaching model. In my review of the literature, I found administration had often lacked providing professional

development and the tools necessary for collaboration to take place (Conderman, et al., 2009; Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011; Friend, et al., 2010). Erin had stated during her interview how crucial it has been to have the support of the administration and being able to have supportive resources from our clinical team (May 19, 2014). I had also reflected during our final week that even though our administration had placed Erin and I in a co-taught room, because we were beginning teachers, it had been beneficial for our professional development (June 23, 2014). It is a necessity to work with other professionals within our school's environment in order to gather all the tools necessary to fully teach our students.

Collaboration yielded benefits in our non-typical learning environment

Another theme that was present within the data was how the unique environmental factors within our school impacted our collaborative group. Co-teaching as a model of teaching arose due the need for teachers to meet the diverse needs of students and the push for students to be within the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (Pappamihel, 2012; Fenty & McDuffie-Landrum, 2011; Conderman, et al., 2009). Our co-teaching and collaborative group was formed mainly to meet the needs of our diverse group of students. One of the biggest pushes for our students, especially as we have older students, is to prepare them for a LRE or most likely a transition into adult services. Julia reflected during week 5 that having our collaborative group allowed her to work with diverse group of students outside her own classroom as well as provided her with the opportunity to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all students within our group (June 20, 2014). This collaborative environment has thus led to the sharing of ideas and resources to meet the needs of our students.

One common obstacle with co-teaching within the typical model of special education teacher and general education teacher is how there can be a sense of ownership of the class and a

negative attitude toward sharing a classroom (Scruggs, et al., 2007). Within the study I conducted I did not find these attitudes present in our co-taught room as no one had a preexisting classroom and all parties were equally responsible for all students. The environment is very much aligned with a team centered approach where all parties are invested in the outcomes of the students. Erin mentioned in her interview that sharing the responsibilities with another person has been ideal and we have been able to accomplish more (May 19, 2014). During Julia's interview she expressed how our team-centered approach with collaboration encourages her to try new strategies and fosters new thoughts and ideas from her colleagues (May 20, 2014). The participants within our group were invested in all of the students' outcomes and willing to try new things as this type of lesson planning and content was novel to all of us.

Strengths and ideas were shared in our collaborative group

Within the data collection for this study one of the conclusions that were drawn was how important and prevalent it was to include all members of a collaborative team. Each person within our collaborative group shared ideas and drew from their own knowledge useful research based plans and practices. In a reflective conversation with Erin and myself about one strength of our co-taught classroom was that both of us come from a diverse educational background and we are all willing and able to share ideas and practices (June 27, 2014). This sharing of knowledge was not only invaluable as Erin and I were novice teachers, but the environment we are working in is also a challenging one that I found was not covered in preparatory educational classes. We face new challenges behaviorally and academically on a daily basis that benefits from having brainstorming partners to share what has worked and bounce ideas off one another.

As typical within a co-taught classroom (Murawski & Huges, 2004; Muraski & Lochner, 2011; Nierengarten, 2013; Scruggs, et al., 2007; Sileo, 2011), our main strategy that we used for

our girls' health group was one teach, one assist. This strategy was useful because we were able to learn from one another's teaching approach as well as assist when we needed a different approach to talk about the content. While co-teaching and observing lessons taught by Julia, I learned a lot about ways to include all students into the lesson no matter their ability.

Co-teaching and collaboration has come about due to the need for teachers to share information and gather resources to meet the needs of diverse students (Scruggs, et al., 2007; Tichnor, et al., 2000). In this co-taught environment, collaboration is essential to meet the needs of all the students because none of our students are typical students and require trial and error as well as thinking outside of the box. "I have found that this group has allowed me to have someone to bounce ideas off of to improve ideas and think of different angles to approach a situation" (May 19, 2014). By having the support in our exchange of ideas with colleagues has provided all of us with the opportunity to get feedback from one another on what strategies may work or what has worked in the past.

Implications for student learning

Group education was found to be important in a special education setting

At our school, we typically place students into classrooms based on behavioral needs as well as age variances. We do not always consider the social or academic needs of our students with our placement. In a study on parental perceptions in a co-taught classroom, some parents agreed with the benefits, social and academic, of different ability peers working alongside one another in a co-taught class (Tichenor, et al., 2000). Considering only one need of a student often leave gaps in the student's treatment at our school because both of those components, social and academic, are necessary for learning and development. One way that we addressed this issue is with social learning groups that are co-taught by teachers.

The students in our group range in academic ability, as well as come from unique disability backgrounds. The need to learn is something that is shared across the student population. The topics we presented not only help to fill the learning gap, but allow the students to learn amongst peers of the same age range. One of the girls in our group struggles with staying on task, as well as motivation to do academic work. Noticeable changes were noted when she worked with her peers within this group; she was willing and able to participate and contribute to our discussion. When planning took place to prepare for our health group we originally decided it should be short, less than 15 minutes long, in order to maintain the students' attention. It was found that participation from the students increased as they were able to work with social peers. Julia also mentioned in her interview that one of biggest influences that our collaboration group has given her is the "opportunity to work with different students". This gave us as a team the ability to broaden our skills working with a variety of students.

Students within our health group were also able to provide academic support for some of the other students within our group. This type of learning has been seen to be beneficial for general education and special education peers (Fenty. et al., 2012), but also works for peers at different levels academically. When we first started our work in the groups, some of the students would want to answer questions or contribute to our group without giving some of the other girls the opportunity of wait-time. So, one of the skills we worked on was waiting and giving our peers time to think. It is important for students to learn that not everyone learns the same. We also focused on teaching our students empathy and how to deal with peers from all different backgrounds (Tichenor, et al., 2000). Often times I see that my students with intellectual disabilities or multiple disabilities focus on themselves and only how things will affect them.

The challenges of assessing students while co-teaching

One of the challenges of formative assessment during lessons is that it is often done in the moment of teaching. These types of assessments may be just mental notes for the moment until they can be recorded at a later time. During my study, Erin had an example during week 4 where students were having trouble understanding the vocabulary used prompting the need for further clarification on the different types of relationships we have with people. Erin shared in her reflection for that week that the girls were specifically confusing “staff” and “community workers” and the roles that each of those play in their own lives (June 11, 2014). With co-teaching, it is important to share these notes about student learning and understanding, as it may determine the primary focus of the next lesson.

In order for students to benefit from having co-teachers in the classroom, teachers must have an open dialogue with intention to effectively communicate on a constant basis (Fenty & McDuffie-Landrun, 2011). During this study my co-teacher and I would meet for our collaborative planning and reflection meetings as well as discuss students’ needs and observations noted during the week. Erin mentioned in her interview that having a co-teacher meant having a platform to share thoughts and ideas (May 19, 2014). Having co-teacher’s work together means having the multiple professionals with different expertise and perspectives work with diverse students to flexibly and deliberately meet their needs in a complex environment (Friend et al., 2010). It is helpful with students with special needs to have more than one source of knowledge to plan and execute lessons because of the complexity of needs the students may have and require for understanding.

The importance of meeting the needs of all students

The academic goal for our collaborative group was to meet the needs of our students to entice them to participate in health education. The age range of our girls was between 17- 21 years-of-age, meaning they were either moving on to adult services or possibly moving to a lesser restrictive environment. Health education is an important area of knowledge for these girls to learn because of its importance and relationship to becoming an independent individual. Through collaborating with clinicians along with the participants within this study we were able to come up with some of the important skills these girls will need in order to meet their educational goals. The typical standard of individualized instruction for a student with disabilities may not be thorough enough to meet all of their academic needs (Scruggs et al., 2007). By having teachers collaborate the content of this lesson it allowed for us to be able to draw from all of our expertise and resources to meet the unique needs of our students.

There are numerous social and behavioral benefits that we discovered during this study for the girls participating within our health group. Julia mentioned in her interview that having a collaborative group has allowed her to work with students from other classes and with different needs than in her own room (May 19, 2014). This strategy also works for a benefit for our students. Having a collaborative group means combining students that might not be able to be all day in the same room, but for 15-30 minutes have an opportunity to work and learn from one another. Students who are taught within a co-taught class are found to have improved social skills and self-esteem compared to those taught solely with non-inclusive peers (Murawski & Hughes, 2009). The students within our group were placed in classrooms based on social appropriateness and willingness to learn together and discuss content. They benefitted from

seeing that they were able to learn with girls around their same age, even though their academic level and disabilities varied greatly.

Implications for my teaching

The importance of working with education professionals in any setting

Collaborating with professionals in schools is an important but complex skill to have and it is not exclusive to only special education teachers (Friend, et al., 2010). I may not always have a co-teacher, but the larger skill in co-teaching is collaboration. The exchange of ideas between educators and other professionals allows for continuous learning and growth for any teacher (Sileo, 2011). I learned through this study that many skills of collaboration can be used in multiple educational settings that I may go into throughout my career. Friend, et al. (2010) claims that “through collaboration professionals can create innovative options within a single system of education that is more responsive to the diversity of today’s learners” (p. 15). Therefore, no matter the setting, professionals can pull from one another’s expertise and backgrounds to meet the needs of their students.

One of the benefits I found with co-teaching was the ability to have a person to help solve problems that arise within the classroom. This is a skill that has impacted me and will be of great value in situations that present themselves in the future within the classroom. With co-teaching, there was a strong connection with Response to Intervention (RTI) (Sileo, 2011; Murawski & Huges, 2009). Where the goal of RTI is to provide specialized instruction before academic placement; (Murawski & Hughes, 2009) teacher collaboration allows for problem solving for the student to meet their unique academic needs so they do not need to be placed in special services. During the study, problem solving took place when students struggled with the content as well as when we were planning strategies that would incorporate all students, no matter their ability, into

each of our lessons. Our specific problem solving involved constant communication, the sharing of ideas, listening to one another's thoughts and using our expertise for planning and strategizing.

The benefits of reflecting and growing as a professional

Another important skill that can be transferred from my experience within this study as well as a co-teacher, is the necessity of self-reflection. Nierengarten (2013) stated that "the importance and power of reflection to educators and their professional development cannot be overstated" (p. 8). Within the study one of the data collection methods was participant reflections, and it was important to hear about how each of us thought the lessons went as well as how our planning and collaborating was going. This skill is important not to skip as an educator because of its usefulness of making sure students' needs are met. In a comment about co-teachers' reflecting, Hepner & Newman (2010) suggests that when co-teachers reflect honestly about their teaching it ensures that there is respect and a mutual understand of expectations (p. 11). Being able to openly discuss with professionals will allow for collaborators to be put on the same level with one another.

As an educator there is a constant need to learn and grow to meet the needs of my students in this ever changing world (Conderman, et al., 2009). Collaboration is one of the means that I will be able to gather resource and learn what works from professionals around me. As a newer teacher, I lack experience working with a variety of students. Being able to use the skills of co-teaching and collaboration to gather knowledge and resources will help me grow and learn as an educator. Co-teaching, historically has come about due to the need for specialized expertise to integrate students with disabilities in a general education classroom (Conderman, et al., 2009; Friend, et al., 2010; Tichenor, et al., 2000). By learning from one another the skills to deliver

curriculum and specialized instruction, co-teachers share their knowledge and learn from one another in order for all students to benefit from an integrated classroom. Within my professional development, collaboration will also help me to learn from my colleagues the skills and knowledge they have in order to professionally develop.

The significance of learning the skills to be a co-teacher

The themes that I learned from this study will guide me throughout several teaching positions within the field of education. One need that research shows for co-teachers is the need for increased professional development on how to be a co-teacher (Nichols & Sheffield, 2014; Scruggs, et al., 2007; Sileo, 2011). Co-teaching has been described as a professional marriage due to the close relationship needed for success (Conderman, et al., 2009). Some of the struggles we had as co-teachers were lack of shared planning time, as well as we were often thought of as two separate teachers, as opposed to a unit, and split up if a staff was needed in another room. I believe that it would have been beneficial for Erin and my professional relationship to have additional training on effective practices for co-teachers, as well as training for administration on how to support co-teachers within our school.

Co-teaching also required effective communication that did not always come naturally within our relationship. We have struggled within this study as well as before it with coordinating plans and finding the time to share students' needs. I benefitted within this study from learning about communication skills as well as from hearing about where we could improve from the other participants' reflections. In one article about the use of Web 2.0 resources, they allow for teachers to interactively collaborate without the constraints of time and space (Charles & Dickens, 2012). I learned how effective this technology had been when we used it within our

study with a shared Google Doc. It was useful to provide ownership to our roles in the group and provided everyone with an outline of what we wanted to accomplish for each lesson.

Recommendations of future research

Co-teaching in alternative teaching environments

While researching co-teaching, I found a lot of information about “how-to” co-teach within an inclusive classroom. Where there is a special educator and general education teacher sharing responsibility in the same room. I think I would benefit from having further research on co-teachers in non-traditional settings. The existing research mentions how there is currently a lack of professional development targeting co-teaching strategies that integrate teachers’ separate expertise (Friend, et al., 2010; Charles & Dickens, 2012; Nichols & Sheffield, 2014; Pearl, et al., 2012; Conderman, et al., 2009). Co-teachers could be placed in a classroom to share responsibilities for numerous reasons, but the data and research to support those teachers are not available.

Effectiveness of co-teaching

Another area of need that was presented among research is the need for a large scale study on the effectiveness of co-teaching in terms of student outcomes (Friend, et al., 2010). The research that I found focuses a lot on the teachers’ relationship and the roles each partner takes. It would be important to look at the student outcomes for all students taught within an inclusive co-taught classroom.

Students’ perspective

One area of further research based on limitations within my own study would be to add the students’ perspective and voice into the data. I also found that within my research on co-teaching the student voice was also lacking. Tichenor, et al. (2009) used a parents’ survey to

include non-educators' opinions about their views and perceptions of their students in an inclusive co-taught classroom. I would suggest that there should be additional studies that include students in the discussion and data collection for future research.

Final thoughts

As I reflect back on when I first began this study, I realize the strength and importance that collaboration and more specifically co-teaching has within my teaching environment. By gathering data on what makes a productive relationship I have learned the skills that I can take throughout my entire career as an educator. Collaboration is important as there will always be an opportunity to share resources and the need for assistance with problem solving.

In this study I was not only able to share reflections and discussions with my colleagues, but I was able to look at my own teaching practices and self-reflections on co-teaching and collaboration. This study has allowed me to build on my own methodology of teaching and improve on my own collaboration skills with my colleagues. I strongly feel that it is important to constantly learn and modify my own teachings to fit the diverse needs of my students.

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Appendix A

Observation and Reflection Protocol

Observation Date and Time: _____ Length of
observation: _____

Collaborative Lesson Planning

Participants
(pseudonym): _____

Lesson(s)
planned: _____

Observation Notes	Reflection Notes
	Heather's Reflection
	Participant #1's Reflection
	Participant #2's Reflection

Closing: I truly appreciate your participation and willingness to participate in this study. As indicated in your consent letter, your identity will be kept confidential.

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Participant:

(pseudonym): _____

Date of Interview and Time: _____

Purpose Statement: ****Start audio recording**** Identify participant by pseudonym, the date, and time******

The reason I want to interview you is that I want to find out your thoughts on collaboration and co-teaching in this environment. I am going to ask you some questions and please answer them to the best of your ability. Please be honest and share your personal belief, as there are not right or wrong answers. I will also add follow up questions as you answer each question. If at any time you feel uncomfortable with the question I ask please know that you will always have the right to decline from answering. You may also stop the interview at any time. Our interview will last approximately 15 minutes. I will be audio recording our conversation, if you have given consent.

Questions:

How does collaboration and/or co-teaching influence your own teaching experiences?

What are some of the difficulties you have experienced with co-teaching and/or collaborating?

What are some factors that support collaboration within the school environment?

Closing:

I truly appreciate your participation and willingness to share your thoughts with me. Your participation and insights will allow me to answer my own inquiries about collaboration and co-teaching. As noted in your consent letter, I will keep your identity confidential.

In the event that I need clarification after transcribing this interview, may I request a follow-up discussion?